IN THE
Shade
OF THE
Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

SAYYID QUṬB

Vol XIII
Sūrahs 26-32

Contents

Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	ʻ	د	d	ض	đ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ţ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ż	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ĥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ş	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:	ـِ	i	ـَ	a	ـُ	u
Long:	ـِي	ī	ـَا	ā	ـُو	ū
Diphthongs:			ـَيْ	ay	ـَوْ	aw

SŪRAH 26

Al-Shu`arā'

(The Poets)

Prologue

Faith, the main theme discussed in this *sūrah,* pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah during the early period of Islam. The subject is examined in all its major aspects from God's oneness: *"Do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment."* (Verse 213), to fearing the Day of Judgement: *"Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]."* (Verses 87-89); belief in the revelation bestowed from on high to Muhammad (peace be upon him): *"Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart — so that you may give warning."* (Verses 192-194), and explaining the risks to which anyone who denies the faith exposes himself including a destructive punishment that may take place in this world, or punishment in the hereafter that awaits the unbelievers: *"They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6) *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227)

The *sūrah* also consoles the Prophet as he faces the determined denials of his message and divine revelation: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?"* (Verse 3) It reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to endure all the hardships they faced, presenting them with examples of earlier believers who remained steadfast when confronted with

similar difficulties.

The main body of the *sūrah* is devoted to historical accounts that take up 180 verses of the *sūrah's* total of 227. Apart from these historical accounts, the *sūrah* includes a short introduction and final comments, but the three elements form a single coherent unit that presents the main theme in different styles, serving a single objective. Hence, only those episodes that are relevant to each historical situation are presented.

An air of warning, for those who reject God's messages, and the subsequent punishment He will inflict prevails throughout. This is only logical since the *sūrah* provides a response to the Quraysh unbelievers who denied the Prophet Muhammad, derided his warnings, turned their backs on God's revelations, hastened the threatened punishment and described revelation and the Qur'ān as either sorcery or poetry inspired by devils.

Although the entire *sūrah* forms one unit, we will divide it into short passages according to the order it follows.

1
If People Would Only Reflect

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

طسٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? (3)

لَعَلَّكَ بَٰخِعٞ نَّفۡسَكَ أَلَّا يَكُونُواْ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. (4)

إِن نَّشَأۡ نُنَزِّلۡ عَلَيۡهِم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ ءَايَةٗ فَظَلَّتۡ أَعۡنَٰقُهُمۡ لَهَا خَٰضِعِينَ ﴿٤﴾

Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. (5)

وَمَا يَأۡتِيهِم مِّن ذِكۡرٖ مِّنَ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ مُحۡدَثٍ إِلَّا كَانُواْ عَنۡهُ مُعۡرِضِينَ ﴿٥﴾

They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride. (6)

فَقَدۡ كَذَّبُواْ فَسَيَأۡتِيهِمۡ أَنۢبَٰٓؤُاْ مَا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يَسۡتَهۡزِءُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? (7)	أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ كَمْ أَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٧﴾
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (8)	إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (9)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

The Prophet's Unnecessary Concern

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (Verses 1-2)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate Arabic letters, Ṭā *Sīn Mīm,* indicating that the verses of the Qur'ān, the book that sets things in full clarity, including the present *sūrah,* are made out of such letters. These letters are available to those who deny divine revelation, and they cannot produce out of them anything similar to this clear book. The nature of the book is discussed at the beginning and end of the *Sūrah,* just as it is discussed in every *sūrah* which has a similar beginning employing separate letters.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet who is concerned about the idolaters and saddened by their rejection of his message and the Qur'ān. It comforts the Prophet telling him that the whole matter is not worth his concern. God could easily have forced them to believe by showing them a clear sign they would not have been able to resist: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission to it."* (Verses 3-4)

There is here a note of remonstration with the Prophet for showing too much concern for the unbelievers and their attitudes: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe?"* (Verse 3) The Prophet is shown to be suffering because of his certainty that their rejection will inevitably incur punishment. Since these people belonged to his own clan and community, he took the matter to heart, feeling heavy at the inevitable prospect. God, however, is too caring to leave him to his grief. The *sūrah* tells him that his responsibility does not

include bringing these people into the fold of believers. Had it been God's will, He would have sent down a miraculous, overpowering sign that would have rendered all their arguments meaningless. They would then have had no option but to declare their belief in God and submit to Him. The verse gives a graphic picture of their submission to such a sign: *"their necks will remain bent in submission."* (Verse 4) This image depicts them with their necks permanently bent, unable ever to look up.

But God Almighty has not chosen to provide such a compelling sign with His last message. Instead, He has made the Qur'ān, a complete and perfect code of living, His miraculous and overpowering sign.

The Inimitability of the Qur'ānic Style

The Qur'ān is miraculous in its construction and artistic presentation, maintaining the same features of excellence throughout. Thus, it is totally unlike human works where we note variations in standard, power and level even by the same author and within the same work. By contrast, the Qur'ān maintains its artistic characteristics at the same level throughout, demonstrating that it is the work of the One who is not influenced by changing situations and temporary circumstances.

The Qur'ān is also unique in its intellectual structure and the mutual complementarity of its parts. Nothing in it occurs by mere coincidence; nothing occurs out of place. All its directives and legislative orders are in full harmony, address human life and regulate all its aspects. There is absolutely no contradiction in it even at the level of minute detail. Not a single aspect or provision in its full volume of legislation is incompatible with human nature. Everything turns around the same pivot, serving the same aim, and maintaining full harmony. This could never have been achieved by human endeavour. It can only be the product of limitless knowledge that is free of the constraints of time and place. It is only such absolute knowledge that can produce such a complete and flawless code.

The Qur'ān is unique in the easy, flowing way it penetrates hearts and souls, opening every lock and touching every point of effect. The way it provides simple and easy solutions to intractable problems is remarkable. On the other hand, its method of educating and moulding people in accordance with its own system, using only the lightest of touches, free of complexity, irregularity or deception, is also extraordinary.

The Islamic message is designed by God to remain open to all communities and all generations. It is not meant for any particular group or location. Hence, its miracle should also remain available to all regardless of their community and generation. Hence God made the Qur'ān His miracle, rather than providing a physical miracle that leaves its onlookers speechless, having no counter argument. Physical miracles

silence only those who see them, but they subsequently become no more than a piece of history. Conversely, the Qur'ān remains today, more than 13 centuries after its revelation, an open book outlining a code for life. People today find in it all that they need to put their lives on the right course, should they but determine to implement it. It leads them to a better world, higher horizons and an infinitely superior destiny. Future generations will find in the Qur'ān much that we have not been able to discover, because the Qur'ān gives every seeker what that seeker needs, while its treasures remain self-renewing, limitless. The unbelievers were unaware of this central issue. Therefore, they continued to turn a deaf ear whenever Qur'ānic revelations were read out to them. *"Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it."* (Verse 5)

We note that God's attribute mentioned here is 'the Most Merciful' indicating His great act of mercy, namely the revelation of the Qur'ān. Thus, their turning away from it appears in its reality: it is an abhorrent act that rejects God's care and grace. They deprive themselves of such mercy when they are the ones who need it most.

Their rejection of God's mercy merits the incurrence of God's punishment: *"They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6) The threat is expressed in general, unspecified terms, with a touch of sarcasm that suits their derision of God's warnings. A more literal translation of this verse is: *they will in time receive the news of what it was they were wont to deride.'* Needless to say, they will not receive any piece of news; rather, they will endure the punishment they have derided, and they, themselves will provide the news as people relate what happens to them.

They demand a miracle while ignoring the numerous miraculous signs God has placed all around them. These are sufficient for anyone with an open heart and mind. Indeed, in every aspect of this marvellous universe there is a great sign providing people with all the reassurance they need: *"Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it? Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe."* (Verses 7-8)

The growth of plants as they ease their way out of the earth is there to be watched at every moment. Moreover, plants are made as male and female, with the two growing separately in some plant species or mostly growing together in the same shoot. Yet it only needs that people should look in order for them to appreciate.

The Qur'ān establishes a direct relation between the human heart and universal scenes so as to awaken people's minds and perceptions. It demonstrates the great aspects of God's creation all around us so that we look at the living universe with an alert mind and a beating heart. This enables us to recognize God through His marvellous creation, and makes us appeal to Him whenever we see this His creation.

Thus we feel His presence at every moment of the day and night. We also realize that we are only one type of God's creatures, subject to the same natural laws that shape existence. We also recognize that we have a special role in the universe that must be fulfilled on earth, the planet which we have been placed in charge of.

"Do they not see the earth, how much of every noble kind We have caused to grow on it?" (Verse 7) This nobility is imparted through life that is given by God, who is most noble and most generous. The phraseology of this verse suggests that we should look at God's creation with honour and respect, and not ignore or belittle it: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign."* (Verse 8) The unbelievers had been demanding a sign while in all this there is a great sign, but few are those who take heed of it: *"Yet most of them will not believe."* (Verse 8)

The *sūrah's* introduction ends with a comment that is repeated every time a point is concluded: *"And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verse 9) He is able to provide all signs and to inflict punishment on those who deny the truth. He is also 'the Merciful' who shows His signs to those who are willing to believe.

2
A Debate with Pharaoh

Your Lord called Moses: ‘Go to the wrongdoing people, (10)	وَإِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبُّكَ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنِ ٱئْتِ ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾
the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?’ (11)	قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ أَلَا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١١﴾
He said: ‘My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, (12)	قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ أَن يُكَذِّبُونِ ﴿١٢﴾
and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. (13)	وَيَضِيقُ صَدْرِى وَلَا يَنطَلِقُ لِسَانِى فَأَرْسِلْ إِلَىٰ هَٰرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾
Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me.’ (14)	وَلَهُمْ عَلَىَّ ذَنۢبٌ فَأَخَافُ أَن يَقْتُلُونِ ﴿١٤﴾
Said He: ‘By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. (15)	قَالَ كَلَّا ۖ فَٱذْهَبَا بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ ۖ إِنَّا مَعَكُم مُّسْتَمِعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾
Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: ‘We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: (16)	فَأْتِيَا فِرْعَوْنَ فَقُولَآ إِنَّا رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾
Let the Children of Israel go with us.’ (17)	أَنْ أَرْسِلْ مَعَنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿١٧﴾
[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: ‘Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many	قَالَ أَلَمْ نُرَبِّكَ فِينَا وَلِيدًا وَلَبِثْتَ فِينَا مِنْ عُمُرِكَ سِنِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

years of your life? (18)

Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' (19)

Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; (20)

and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. (21)

And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?' (22)

Pharaoh said: And what is that "Lord of all the worlds"? (23)

[Moses] answered: 'He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure.' (24)

[Pharaoh] said to those around him: 'Do you hear?' (25)

[Moses] said: 'He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old.' (26)

[Pharaoh] said: 'For certain, the messenger who has been sent to you is indeed a madman.' (27)

[Moses] went on: 'He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason.' (28)

[Pharaoh] said: 'If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have

وَفَعَلْتَ فَعْلَتَكَ ٱلَّتِى فَعَلْتَ وَأَنتَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

قَالَ فَعَلْتُهَآ إِذًا وَأَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

فَفَرَرْتُ مِنكُمْ لَمَّا خِفْتُكُمْ فَوَهَبَ لِى رَبِّى حُكْمًا وَجَعَلَنِى مِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

وَتِلْكَ نِعْمَةٌ تَمُنُّهَا عَلَىَّ أَنْ عَبَّدتَّ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٢٢﴾

قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ وَمَا رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

قَالَ رَبُّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

قَالَ لِمَنْ حَوْلَهُۥٓ أَلَا تَسْتَمِعُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

قَالَ إِنَّ رَسُولَكُمُ ٱلَّذِىٓ أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ لَمَجْنُونٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

قَالَ رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقِ وَٱلْمَغْرِبِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

قَالَ لَئِنِ ٱتَّخَذْتَ إِلَٰهًا غَيْرِى لَأَجْعَلَنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلْمَسْجُونِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

you imprisoned.' (29)

Said [Moses]: 'Even if I bring before you a clear proof?' (30)

[Pharaoh] said: 'Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth.' (31)

So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. (32)

And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers. (33)

[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: 'This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge (34)

who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?' (35)

They said: 'Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities (36)

to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill.' (37)

So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, (38)

and the people were asked: 'Are you all present, (39)

so that we may follow the sorcerers if

قَالَ أَوَلَوۡ جِئۡتُكَ بِشَيۡءٖ مُّبِينٖ ٣٠

قَالَ فَأۡتِ بِهِۦٓ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ
ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٣١

فَأَلۡقَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ ثُعۡبَانٞ مُّبِينٞ ٣٢

وَنَزَعَ يَدَهُۥ فَإِذَا هِيَ بَيۡضَآءُ لِلنَّٰظِرِينَ
٣٣

قَالَ لِلۡمَلَإِ حَوۡلَهُۥٓ إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَسَٰحِرٌ عَلِيمٞ
٣٤

يُرِيدُ أَن يُخۡرِجَكُم مِّنۡ أَرۡضِكُم
بِسِحۡرِهِۦ فَمَاذَا تَأۡمُرُونَ ٣٥

قَالُوٓاْ أَرۡجِهۡ وَأَخَاهُ وَٱبۡعَثۡ فِي ٱلۡمَدَآئِنِ
حَٰشِرِينَ ٣٦

يَأۡتُوكَ بِكُلِّ سَحَّارٍ عَلِيمٖ ٣٧

فَجُمِعَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ لِمِيقَٰتِ يَوۡمٖ مَّعۡلُومٖ ٣٨

وَقِيلَ لِلنَّاسِ هَلۡ أَنتُم مُّجۡتَمِعُونَ ٣٩

لَعَلَّنَا نَتَّبِعُ ٱلسَّحَرَةَ إِن كَانُواْ هُمُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبِينَ

they emerge triumphant?' (40)

﴿٤٠﴾

When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?' (41)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ قَالُواْ لِفِرۡعَوۡنَ أَئِنَّ لَنَا
لَأَجۡرًا إِن كُنَّا نَحۡنُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

Said he: 'Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.' (42)

قَالَ نَعَمۡ وَإِنَّكُمۡ إِذٗا لَّمِنَ ٱلۡمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you are going to throw!' (43)

قَالَ لَهُم مُّوسَىٰٓ أَلۡقُواْ مَآ أَنتُم مُّلۡقُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.' (44)

فَأَلۡقَوۡاْ حِبَالَهُمۡ وَعِصِيَّهُمۡ وَقَالُواْ بِعِزَّةِ
فِرۡعَوۡنَ إِنَّا لَنَحۡنُ ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Then Moses threw his staff, and it swallowed up their false devices. (45)

فَأَلۡقَىٰ مُوسَىٰ عَصَاهُ فَإِذَا هِيَ تَلۡقَفُ مَا
يَأۡفِكُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, (46)

فَأُلۡقِيَ ٱلسَّحَرَةُ سَٰجِدِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, (47)

قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

the Lord of Moses and Aaron.' (48)

رَبِّ مُوسَىٰ وَهَٰرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

[Pharaoh] said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.' (49)

قَالَ ءَامَنتُمۡ لَهُۥ قَبۡلَ أَنۡ ءَاذَنَ لَكُمۡۖ إِنَّهُۥ
لَكَبِيرُكُمُ ٱلَّذِي عَلَّمَكُمُ ٱلسِّحۡرَ فَلَسَوۡفَ
تَعۡلَمُونَۚ لَأُقَطِّعَنَّ أَيۡدِيَكُمۡ وَأَرۡجُلَكُم مِّنۡ
خِلَٰفٖ وَلَأُصَلِّبَنَّكُمۡ أَجۡمَعِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. (50)

قَالُواْ لَا ضَيۡرَۖ إِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا مُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first

إِنَّا نَطۡمَعُ أَن يَغۡفِرَ لَنَا رَبُّنَا خَطَٰيَٰنَآ أَن

كُنَّآ أَوَّلَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

who have believed.' (51)

۞ وَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنۡ أَسۡرِ بِعِبَادِيٓ
إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' (52)

فَأَرۡسَلَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ فِي ٱلۡمَدَآئِنِ حَٰشِرِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, (53)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَشِرۡذِمَةٞ قَلِيلُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

[saying]: 'These are but a small band, (54)

وَإِنَّهُمۡ لَنَا لَغَآئِظُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and most certainly they have enraged us; (55)

وَإِنَّا لَجَمِيعٌ حَٰذِرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

but we are all united, and well prepared.' (56)

فَأَخۡرَجۡنَٰهُم مِّن جَنَّٰتٖ وَعُيُونٖ ﴿٥٧﴾

Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, (57)

وَكُنُوزٖ وَمَقَامٖ كَرِيمٖ ﴿٥٨﴾

treasures and honourable positions. (58)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَأَوۡرَثۡنَٰهَا بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel. (59)

فَأَتۡبَعُوهُم مُّشۡرِقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. (60)

فَلَمَّا تَرَٰٓءَا ٱلۡجَمۡعَانِ قَالَ أَصۡحَٰبُ
مُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّا لَمُدۡرَكُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' (61)

قَالَ كَلَّآۖ إِنَّ مَعِيَ رَبِّي سَيَهۡدِينِ ﴿٦٢﴾

He replied: 'No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' (62)

فَأَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنِ ٱضۡرِب بِّعَصَاكَ
ٱلۡبَحۡرَۖ فَٱنفَلَقَ فَكَانَ كُلُّ فِرۡقٖ كَٱلطَّوۡدِ

And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff.' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain.

(63)	ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٦٣﴾
And We caused the others to draw near, (64)	وَأَزْلَفْنَا ثَمَّ ٱلْـَٔاخَرِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾
and We saved Moses and all who were with him, (65)	وَأَنجَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥٓ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾
while We caused the others to drown. (66)	ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا ٱلْـَٔاخَرِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (67)	إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (68)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٦٨﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* recounts here a major episode from Moses' history, which fits perfectly with the main theme and the emphasis it places on the fate of those who deny divine messages, accusing God's messengers of fabrication. It also comforts the Prophet as he faces the unbelievers' accusations, reassuring him that God will always take care of His message and those who believe in it and continue to advocate it in the face of determined opposition. Such advocates may be powerless, unable to match the might of the tyrannical forces lined up against them and who subject them to brutal persecution. This incidentally was precisely the case of the Muslims in Makkah at that time. Providing such historical accounts was one of the means of educating the Muslim community employed in the Qur'ān.

Earlier in the Qur'ān, episodes from Moses' story were told in *Sūrahs* 2 The Cow, 5 The Repast, 7 The Heights, 10 Jonah, *17* The Night Journey, 18 The Cave and 20 Ṭā Hā, with some brief references to it in other *sūrahs.* In each case, the presented episode or reference fits perfectly with the theme of the *sūrah* and matches the main drift of its context. The same applies here. The account clearly contributes to the illustration of the theme.

Here, we see how Moses met with opposition from Pharaoh and his people. It ends with their drowning to forestall any attempt to persecute Moses and his

followers. It also mentions the fact that Moses and the Children of Israel were saved. This confirms the truth of God's statement at the end of the *sūrah,* threatening the unbelievers: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227) It also confirms the same threat mentioned at the opening of the *sūrah: "They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verse 6)

This episode is divided into a number of scenes, with gaps in between. These gaps are very brief, allowing the curtains to drop on one scene before they are raised again to reveal another. This is an important aspect of the Qur'ānic approach to storytelling. We have here a total of seven scenes, beginning with one in which we see how Moses receives God's call, is assigned his message and given revelations. It also includes the dialogue that took place between him and his Lord. The second scene consists of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh and his chiefs, in which Moses shows the two signs given to him, namely, his staff and his hand becoming shining white. Pharaoh's scheming as he gathers his sorcerers and assembles all the people for the confrontation provides the third scene. We are then entertained to a scene of the sorcerers gathered in Pharaoh's presence, making sure that they will receive some handsome reward. The fifth scene shows the contest that ends with the total submission of the sorcerers and their declaration of their belief in God, followed by the threats uttered by Pharaoh. Next, we have two images: God's inspiration to Moses to move forth with God's servants by night, and Pharaoh's sending summoners to raise an army to chase the Children of Israel. The final scene is that of the two hosts drawing close by the sea and its dramatic end: the sea is parted, and the believers are saved while the unbelievers are drowned.

These scenes are also painted in *Sūrahs 7,* 10 and 20: The Heights, Jonah and Ṭā Hā respectively. But in each case, they are presented in a different way, suited to the context in which they occur. Thus they serve to highlight what is suitable for each *sūrah.* For example, in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is briefly recounted, and that of the sorcerers and their assembly is shown at a rapid pace, while the picture of Pharaoh's scheming with his chiefs is related at length, giving more detail. It also shows the signs given to Moses during his stay in Egypt following his contest with the sorcerers before showing the scene at the sea with the believers being saved and the unbelievers drowned. It then moves on to provide several images of what happened to the Children of Israel after they crossed the parted sea. Nothing of this is mentioned in this *sūrah,* while we have more detail of the argument that took place between Moses and Pharaoh about God's oneness and the revelations He vouchsafed to His messenger. This was the central point of argument between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the unbelievers in Makkah.

In *Sūrah* 10, Jonah, the first scene of confrontation is briefly shown, making no mention of the two signs given to Moses, namely the staff and his hand. It also provides a brief reference to the contest between Moses and the sorcerers, while both scenes are shown here in more detail.

Sūrah 20, 11 Ha, portrays the first scene of the dialogue between Moses and his Lord at greater length, before painting the scenes of the confrontation with Pharaoh and the contest with the sorcerers in great detail. It also accompanies the Children of Israel for a long part of their journey. In this *sūrah,* however, nothing is mentioned about what happens to them after they were saved.

Hence, we can say that there is no repetition of the story despite the fact that numerous references are made to it in the Qur'ān. The episodes chosen for discussion each time, the scenes painted, and the aspects emphasized in each scene and the way they are portrayed makes each account stand out at its particular position as new, and perfectly suited to the context in which it occurs.

God's Call to Moses

> *Your Lord called Moses: 'Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?' He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me. 'Said He: 'By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.'* (Verses 10-17)

The address here is to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). At the opening of the *sūrah,* God says to him: "*Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride.*" (Verses 3-6) The *sūrah* then gives him accounts of what happened to some of the communities that rejected God's messages and how they suffered His punishment.

"*Your Lord called Moses: Go to the wrongdoing people, the people of Pharaoh. Will they have no fear of God?*" (Verses 10-11) These two verses paint the first scene which shows Moses being given his message. It begins by exposing the people he must go to, declaring that they are 'wrongdoing'. They do themselves a great wrong by

denying God's message, and they do much wrong to the Children of Israel, killing their men but sparing their women and inflicting much torture on them. Hence, the *sūrah* describes them as wrongdoing before it specifies who they are. It then calls on Moses and all people to wonder at them: *"Will they have no fear of God?"* Will they continue to be heedless of the likely outcome of their wrongdoing? Will they not mend their erring ways? Theirs is certainly a singular situation.

Moses, however, was not unaware of Pharaoh and his regime. Indeed, he was fully aware of his oppressive rule and the injustice he meted out to people. Hence, Moses realizes that the task assigned to him is difficult and that his mission is bound to meet with stiff resistance. Hence, he complains to his Lord of his own weakness. His complaints, however, are not those of one who does not wish to carry out the task. On the contrary, he is determined to fulfil it, but he seeks help from God.

> *He said: My Lord, I fear that they will charge me with falsehood, and then my breast will be straitened and my tongue will not be fluent. So send as well for Aaron. Moreover, they have a charge of crime against me, and I fear that they will kill me.* (Verses 12-14)

What Moses' statement signifies is that he was not worried about being rejected by Pharaoh and his people; rather, what worried him was that this should happen at a time when he felt ill at ease and when his tongue lacked fluent argument. He suffered from a speech impediment, which he mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, as he prayed to God to remove it: *"My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say."* (20: 25-28) Should this difficulty occur while one is speaking, it makes the speaker ill at ease, which in turn makes the impediment worse. Thus, the person suffering from it feels unable to express himself. This becomes a vicious circle and anger inevitably sets in. Hence, Moses feared that he might suffer this problem when he confronted a despotic tyrant like Pharaoh with God's message. Hence, he complains to God of his own weakness, and expresses his fears in respect of delivering his Lord's message. The point of his request is that God include his brother Aaron in carrying out this task. This request does not express any reluctance on Moses' part to carry out God's orders, but reflects his fear of falling short of the task. Aaron is more eloquent, which means that he has an easier temperament. Thus, should Moses suffer a block as he speaks, or should he feel straitened in heart, Aaron could then step in to provide the proper argument. Although Moses prays, as related in *Sūrah* 20, that God remove his speech impediment, he also requests that Aaron be assigned to help him in the delivery of the divine message.

The same may be said of his other statement: *"Moreover, they have a charge of crime*

against me, and I fear that they will kill me." (Verse 14) Again, Moses does not express any fear in confronting Pharaoh with the call to believe in God, nor does he seek to abandon the mission assigned to him; rather, this is all given as an added reason for the need to include Aaron. Should Pharaoh kill Moses, Aaron would be able to carry on the mission and complete the task. Thus, we should read Moses' prayer as a precaution aiming to ensure that the divine message was properly and fully delivered. It is exactly the kind of attitude that can be expected from a messenger like Moses whom God had chosen and reared under His own watchful eye.

Knowing how keen Moses was to fulfil his task and his worry lest his weakness make him fall short of what was expected of him, God grants his requests and gives him reassurance. The *sūrah* gives no specific mention of how his prayers were answered, how Aaron received his assignment, or how they both arrived in Egypt. Instead, it shows the two brothers receiving their detailed instructions together and at the same moment as reassurance is given to Moses and his fears are dismissed in an expression that primarily denotes an order to stop: *'kallā!'* This is translated in the text as *'By no means!'*

> *Said He: By no means! Go forth, then, both of you, with Our signs; We are with you, listening to all. Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds: Let the Children of Israel go with us.'* (Verses 15-17)

By no means! Your breast will not be straitened, your tongue will not be impaired, and they will not kill you. Remove all such thoughts from your mind, and proceed with your brother, equipped with Our signs. Moses had already seen two of these: his staff turning into a serpent and his hand changing colour such that it looked as if it shone a brilliant white. These aspects, however, are not mentioned in this *sūrah* because the emphasis here is on the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses, the contest with the sorcerers and the drowning of Pharaoh and his host while the believers are saved.

Moses and Aaron are told to go forth, and God also tells them: "*We are with you, listening to all."* What power! What care and what security! All this is given to them. Indeed, God is with them and with every human being at every moment, but the companionship highlighted here is that of support at difficult moments. It is shown here in the form of listening, which denotes full attention and ready support.

Moses and Aaron are told to clearly outline to Pharaoh their assigned mission, fearing nothing and hiding nothing: *"Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, and say: 'We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds.'"* (Verse 16) The Arabic text uses the singular form for 'messenger', *rasūl,* although the task is assigned to both brothers. However, because the assignment given to both is a single one, they are treated as a single

messenger to Pharaoh, the despot who claimed to be God and declared to his people: *"I know of no deity for you other than myself!"* (28: 38) Thus, the mission assigned to them is to declare the truth of God's oneness right at the very outset and without ambiguity or hesitation. There is to be no precaution against any adverse reception. For this is the truth that allows no half measures.

As messengers from the Lord of the universe, they make their demands clear: *"We are messengers from the Lord of all the worlds. Let the Children of Israel go with us."* (Verses 16-17) It is clear from this statement and similar ones in the Qur'ān that Moses was not required to address his message to Pharaoh and his people, or to call on them to believe in his faith or implement the message entrusted to him. He simply required them to set the Children of Israel free so that they could worship their Lord as they pleased. They were aware of their true faith, which they had held since the time of their first father, Israel, or Jacob, (peace be upon him). This faith, however, had weakened in their hearts allowing alien beliefs to creep in. Therefore, God sent Moses to save them from Pharaoh's injustice and to purge their monotheistic faith of all foreign and corrupt elements.

A Sarcastic Exchange with Pharaoh

Up to this point we have watched as the message is entrusted to Moses and Aaron, and how their task is outlined for them. But the curtains fall here. When, a moment later, they are raised again, we are in full view of the confrontation that takes place with Pharaoh. What happens in between is typically deleted.

> *[Pharaoh] said [to Moses]: Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever.' Replied [Moses]: 'I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?'* (Verses 18-22)

Pharaoh is amazed as Moses makes his unexpected claim to be a messenger from God, the Lord of the universe. He is further amazed as Moses demands that he free the Children of Israel. The last thing he knew of Moses was that he was brought up in his palace after being found as a newborn child floating in a basket on the Nile. As a young man he had killed an Egyptian who was involved in a fight with an Israelite and ran away. It is said that the Egyptian he killed belonged to Pharaoh's entourage. This means that there was a huge gap between Moses' status at that time and his new claims which he puts before Pharaoh just a mere ten years later. Hence, Pharaoh is

sarcastic, asking in an affected air of surprise: *"Did we not bring you up when you were an infant? And did you not stay with us many years of your life? Yet you have done that deed of yours while being an unbeliever."* (Verses 18-19) Is this how you repay our kindness as we looked after you when you were a young child? Is it fair that you come today professing a religion other than ours, rebelling against the authority of the king who brought you up in his palace, and calling on people to abandon his worship?

How come that during all those years you stayed with us you did not mention anything of the wild claims you are now making, giving us no prelude to what was to come? Pharaoh then reminds Moses of the incident leading to the killing of the Egyptian, giving it an air of exaggeration: *"Yet you have done that deed of yours..."* It was a ghastly deed that should never be mentioned or described in real terms. Yet you did it *"while being an unbeliever."* You did not believe then in the Lord of all the worlds, about whom you are now telling us.

Thus we see Pharaoh making what he thought was a final argument and against which Moses would have no reply, especially his killing of an Egyptian and the punishment that could be inflicted on him. His words are clearly meant as an implied threat.

Since God answered his prayer and cured his speech impediment, Moses rejoins with a clear reply: *"'I committed it while I was still going astray; and I fled from you because I feared you. Then my Lord granted me sound judgement and made me one of [His] messengers. And what sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?'"* (Verses 21-22) I did it when I was ignorant, rushing to defend anyone from among my people. This is different from my present commitment to my faith which is based on sound judgement granted me by my Lord. *"I fled from you because I feared you."* But God has been good to me, bestowing on me the gift of wisdom and making me one of His messengers. I am not a unique phenomenon; rather, one of the chosen group of God's messengers.[1]

Moses then uses a touch of sarcasm in reply to Pharaoh's own sarcastic remarks, but he only states the truth: *"What sort of favour is this you are taunting me with: was it not because you had enslaved the Children of Israel?" The* fact that I was reared in your palace came about only as a result of your enslavement of the Children of Israel, and your killing of their children. This was the reason why my mother put me in a basket to float along the Nile. When your people found me, I was brought up in your palace, not in my parents' home. What favour is this that you press against me?

[1] It should be noted here that Moses refers to himself as one of God's messengers, rather than using the singular form. This serves two purposes: (1) it fits with rhyming verse endings and thus maintains the musical beat running throughout the *sūrah;* and (2) it emphasizes the fact that he was one of many sent to different peoples in different generations to provide divine guidance to mankind.

The Challenge Continues

At this point, Pharaoh stops this line of argument and asks Moses for the central point of his claims, but his questioning carries overtones of ridicule and derision aimed at none other than God Himself. *"Pharaoh said: And what is that 'Lord of all the worlds?'"* (Verse 23) How arrogant and insolent! He is saying: what is this Lord of the worlds about whom you describe yourself as His messenger? Such a question can only mean a denial of the very point it relates to, and a ridicule of the statement and the person making it. He considers the whole situation impossible and unworthy of discussion.

Moses' reply points to God's Lordship over the entire visible universe and all that there is in it: *"[Moses] answered: He is the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if you want to be sure."* (Verse 24) Thus, his answer refutes Pharaoh's denial, rendering it worthless. He tells him that God is the Lord of the entire universe which neither Pharaoh's power nor his knowledge can ever reach. The utmost that Pharaoh can boast of is that he is a deity over the people of the Nile Valley and its overall lord. But then this is a tiny little particle when compared to the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. We discern in Moses' answer his dismissal of Pharaoh's claims as vain boasts, turning his attention to the vast universe, inviting him to contemplate its size and the One who is Lord over it all. That is certainly the Lord of all the worlds. He concludes his answer with a comment inviting the people to work for the achievement of certainty: *"If you want to be sure."*

Pharaoh turns to those around him, expressing amazement at this response. Or maybe he wanted them not to be influenced by it. This is typical of all tyrants who fear that simple words of truth might influence the hearts and minds of the masses: *"[Pharaoh] said to those around him: Do you hear?"* (Verse 25) Do you hear this singular statement which was never uttered by anyone we know?

Moses replies by stressing another attribute of God, the Lord of all creatures: *"[Moses] said: He is your Lord as well as the Lord of your forefathers of old."* (Verse 26) This answer is directed at Pharaoh, his status and claims even more. He tells him that God, the Lord of all the worlds, is also his Lord, while Pharaoh is nothing more than one of His servants. He is certainly not a deity as he claims. His people are also subject to God, their true Lord, while Pharaoh has no lordship over them. Indeed God is the Lord of their forefathers of old, which means that the hereditary aspect on which Pharaoh's claims rely is false. None other than God has ever been Lord of the worlds.

This hit hard at Pharaoh and he could not remain silent when his elders and nobles were listening. Hence, he derisively states that his adversary is mad: *"[Pharaoh] said: Indeed, the messenger who has been sent to you is, of a certainty, a*

madman." (Verse 27) His derision is directed at the very issue of bearing God's message so as to turn people away from it. He charges Moses with madness in order to nullify the effect of his statement that questions the very basis of Pharaoh's political and religious position, as it aims to remind people of their Lord, the Lord of their forefathers.

Nothing of Pharaoh's derision could weaken Moses and his resolve. Therefore, he continues to state the truth that hits hard at all tyrants: *"[Moses] went on: He is indeed the Lord of the east and the west and of all that is between them, if you would but use your reason."* (Verse 28) The Arabic words *mashriq* and *maghrib,* used for east and west, also denote the processes of planets and stars rising and setting. These are two great scenes which we see every day, but our minds seldom reflect on them because of over familiarity. These two processes are great indeed, and neither Pharaoh nor any tyrant can claim to have any control over them. Who does, then, control them, setting them in a perfect order and timing that ensures their continuity without fail or deviation? Moses' answer shakes dormant hearts and awakens sleeping souls. In this way, he calls on people to reflect and contemplate, *"if you would but use your reason."*

Brutal Threats versus Logical Arguments

Tyranny does not fear anything more than the reawakening of people's hearts. It does not hate anyone more than an advocate of clear vision and right thinking. Its main opponent is the one who tries to awaken people's consciences. When Moses touched people's hearts with his description of God Almighty, Pharaoh was extremely angry. He ended the argument with a clear threat of force, which is the ultimate recourse of all tyrants, when they feel that any counter argument is too powerful. *"[Pharaoh] said: If you ever serve a god other than me, I will most certainly have you imprisoned."* (Verse 29)

Such is the argument and the evidence supporting it: a clear threat of imprisonment. The prison is available and the measure itself has been taken against others. It is a measure that exposes the weakness of falsehood when it faces the overwhelming power of the truth. Tyrants know no other way.

Nevertheless, Moses did not lose his composure. How could he have when he is God's messenger, enjoying the support God has promised him and his brother? Hence, he keeps the argument going, reopening the book Pharaoh wants to close, and delivering a new piece of evidence: *"Said [Moses]: Even if I bring before you a clear proof?"* (Verse 30) Here, he asks Pharaoh: will you still have me imprisoned if I provide irrefutable proof that all I am saying is true? This put Pharaoh on the spot in front of a large gathering. He realized that if he were to refuse this new proof outright, he would only demonstrate his own weakness in the face of Moses'

powerful argument: this despite his description of Moses as a madman. He felt that his only option was to demand such proof: Hence, *"[Pharaoh] said: Produce it, then, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 31)

"If you area man of truth," may be taken to mean 'if you are truthful in what you claim to be', or 'if you truly have clear proof'. Thus we see Pharaoh continuing to raise doubts about Moses, fearing that his argument may be well received by those present.

At this point Moses produces his two physical miracles, having delayed their display until Pharaoh has thrown down his utmost challenge: *"So he threw down his staff and behold, it was a serpent, plain for all to see. And he drew out his hand, and behold, it was white to the onlookers."* (Verses 32-33) The way these two verses are phrased suggest that the staff was physically transformed into a real, living serpent. His hand, as he drew it out, was really a shining, brilliant white. There was no delusion or fantasy of the sort sorcerers employ when they deceive the senses without altering any element of reality.

The miracle of life starting from where no human being knows occurs at every moment without people paying much attention to it, because of their long familiarity with it, or perhaps because they do not look upon it as a challenge. In Pharaoh's court, in front of his entire entourage, the production of these two miracles had the effect of nothing less than a violent earthquake.

Pharaoh recognized that he was facing a powerful miracle, and he sensed the weakness of his own position. Hence he was quick to provide a damage-limitation exercise, trying to ensure the support of his people, raising their fear of Moses and his community: *"[Pharaoh] said to the noble ones around him: This is indeed a sorcerer of great knowledge who wants to drive you out of your land by his sorcery. What, then, do you advise?"* (Verses 34-35)

In Pharaoh's statement we note three important elements: (1) his acknowledgement of the powerful miracle, even though he called it sorcery — he describes Moses as a *"sorcerer of great knowledge"*; (2) his fear that people might be so influenced by Moses and his argument that he says Moses *"wants to drive you out of your land"*; (3) his adoption of a humble attitude with the people whom he wanted to look upon him as their lord. He asks them for advice, although Pharaoh never sought such advice while they prostrated themselves before him.

Falsehood Comes to Grief

This is a typical position to which tyrants resort when they feel their grip on power weakening. They seem to soften up, seeking the help of the people they have

been trampling over. They put up a facade of consultation with them, but this is only temporary until the danger has passed. When they feel they are safe again, they revert to their tyranny, tolerating no opposition whatsoever.

Those around him fell for his ploy because they shared his falsehood and were keen for the *status quo* to continue for it ensured their influential positions in the state hierarchy. They feared that Moses and the Children of Israel would take their land from them should the masses follow him and Aaron. Hence, these noble chiefs were quick to give their advice to Pharaoh, suggesting that he could match one type of sorcery with another, provided there was a period of preparation: *"They said: Let him and his brother wait a while, and send heralds to all cities to bring before you every sorcerer of great skill."* (Verses 36-37) The plan, then, was to gain time while Pharaoh sent word to all Egyptian cities summoning every skilful sorcerer who could match or excel Moses.

The curtains drop here. When they are raised again we see the sorcerers assembled and the people gathering in large numbers to watch the great contest. Their support for the sorcerers is raised to a high pitch, for they enjoyed the backing of those in power. Thus, the stage was ready for the battle between truth and falsehood, divine faith and tyranny: *"So the sorcerers were assembled at a set time on an appointed day, and the people were asked: Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers if they emerge triumphant."* (Verses 38-40)

The style used in these verses suggests a deliberate plan to excite the masses and keep people in full expectation: *"Are you all present, so that we may follow the sorcerers?"* Are you all in attendance and ready for the contest to begin? Soon you will see with your own eyes the sorcerers defeat this Israelite called Moses! On such occasions, the masses always flock in, oblivious to the fact that tyrannical rulers manipulate them for their own ends. They bring them to such gatherings and show occasions so as to divert their attentions away from the miserable conditions and oppression they endure.

We then see the sorcerers in an audience with Pharaoh, prior to the match, making sure that they will secure his reward if they win. He is ready with a promise of a very handsome reward, and a position close to his throne: *"When the sorcerers arrived they said to Pharaoh: 'Will there be a [handsome] reward for us if we are the ones to prevail?' Said he: 'Yes, indeed! And in that case you will be among those who are close to me.'"* (Verses 4 1-42)

Thus the whole thing involves nothing other than a mercenary group ready to use their skills to help Pharaoh, the tyrant, in return for some pecuniary gain. There is no question of faith or an issue of principle. It is all about personal gain and interest. It is such people that are used by tyrants everywhere and throughout all periods of

history. Their eagerness betrays their reward motive, a reward they will receive for their role in deluding the masses. Hence why Pharaoh promises them much more than just pecuniary gain. He promises them a position close to his own.

Turning the Scales against Pharaoh

The *sūrah* then draws before our eyes the whole contest and the great events that follow:

> *Moses said to them: 'Throw whatever you are going to throw!' So they threw their ropes and staffs, and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.' Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices. The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron. [Pharaoh] said: 'You believe in Him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.' They said:' No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed.'* (Verses 43-51)

It all starts with an ordinary, quiet scene; yet it gives us the sense that Moses was perfectly reassured that he represented the truth. Hence, he cared little for the multitude of sorcerers gathered from all over Egypt, ready to employ their skills to prove Pharaoh's case. His reassurance is reflected in his allowing them to be the first to start: *"Moses said to them: Throw whatever you are going to throw!"* (Verse 43)

His words imply that whatever they could produce was of little interest to him. For their part, the sorcerers mustered their best efforts and skills, starting the match in Pharaoh's name and with his help: *"So they threw their ropes and staffs; and said: 'By Pharaoh's might, it is we indeed who will prevail.'"* (Verse 44) The *sūrah* does not tell us what happened to their ropes and staffs, which is detailed in *Sūrahs* 7 and 20, The Heights and Ṭā Hā respectively. Thus it retains the atmosphere of reassurance and steadfastness in support of the truth. Instead, the *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us of the result of the encounter, since this is its main purpose: *"Then Moses threw his staff and it swallowed up their false devices."* (Verse 45)

This was a great surprise to the sorcerers who were not expecting anything of the sort. They had mustered all their power, using their best skills in an area in which they were the undisputed masters. What they produced was the best any sorcerer could produce. Besides, they were many, gathered from all over Egypt, while Moses stood alone, with nothing in his hand other than his staff. Yet it immediately

swallowed in one fast movement all they could produce. Besides, they were fully aware that magic relied on delusion, but his staff swallowed their ropes and staffs for real, leaving nothing of them. Had Moses used trickery, their ropes and staffs would have remained there after an imaginary scene suggesting that they were being swallowed. But as they looked around, they could see nothing remaining of their ropes and staffs. Hence, they had no choice but to submit to the clear truth staring them in the face. They were the first to know that it was the truth: *"The sorcerers fell down prostrating themselves, and said: 'We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.'"* (Verses 46-48)

Only a moment earlier they were ready to lend their skills for pecuniary gain, looking forward to handsome wages for their skilful manipulation. The question of faith and principle meant little to them. Now, however, as the truth touches their hearts, they undergo a complete transformation. They are shaken to the bottom of their hearts, and all falsehood is removed. Within a brief moment, their hearts are clear, ready to respond to the truth, full of faith. Thus, they voluntarily prostrate themselves and repeat the words declaring their unshakeable faith: *"We believe in the Lord of all the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron."* (Verses 47-48)

The human heart is amazing. A single touch on the right spot changes it completely. The Prophet states the truth as he says: "Every human heart is held within two fingers in God's hand: He sets it straight or leaves it to stray, as He pleases." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Thus, the hired sorcerers were transformed into a group of the best believers, in front of the assembled masses as well as Pharaoh and his noble chiefs. They did not think of the consequences that their declaration of conversion to faith would produce. They cared little for Pharaoh's reaction or what he would do to them.

Such a transformation must have dealt a great blow to Pharaoh. The masses were led to believe the great lie reiterated by Pharaoh's men that Moses, the Israelite, was a mere sorcerer who wanted to take over their land by means of his sorcery. If he won, he would give power to his own people. But the sorcerers were sure to overpower him and put him in his place, or so they were told. The masses were witnesses to the great encounter that unfolded, with the sorcerers producing their tricks in Pharaoh's name and under his protection. Yet in no time, they were utterly defeated, acknowledging their defeat, declaring that Moses delivered the message of the truth, and that they themselves now believed in God, the Lord of all the worlds. Their transformation meant that they disowned Pharaoh's worship only a brief moment after they were expecting to receive their wages from him.

The sorcerers' transformation represented a real threat to Pharaoh, as it deflated the legend on which his power relied, namely the legend that he was a deity, or the son of gods. The transformation was declared by the sorcerers at a time when sorcery

was a sacred profession preserved for Egypt's priesthood. It was these very sorcerers that now declared their belief in the Lord of all the worlds, He who had given Moses and Aaron their message. The masses always followed the priests in their beliefs. If these were to abandon Pharaoh, what would be left for him except brute force? Such force cannot, on its own, provide reliable support to protect a regime of government.

Brute Force to Suppress Faith

We can then imagine the panic that affected Pharaoh and his nobles as they heard the sorcerers' declaration and their profound, unshakeable belief in God, before whom they now prostrated themselves.

Enraged, Pharaoh issued a clear warning that he would inflict all sorts of punishment upon the sorcerers. He further accused them of conspiring with Moses against him and the Egyptian people:

> *[Pharaoh] said: You believe in him even before I have given you permission! Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft! But in time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all.* (Verse 49)

The Qur'ānic text places special emphasis on Pharaoh's first words, *"you believe in him even before I have given you permission,"* so as to highlight the surrender to Moses without first obtaining Pharaoh's permission. Thus, he accuses them of a purposeful conspiracy in which they willingly participated, knowing full well its outcome. He could not appreciate what had touched their hearts. How could a tyrant feel the effect of faith on people's minds and hearts? He then delivered his hasty accusation to explain their transformation: *"Surely, this one must be your master who has taught you witchcraft!"* (Verse 49) This is a very strange accusation which defies explanation unless one says that some of these priest sorcerers — since the religion that made Pharaoh a deity relied on magic-practising priests — attended to Moses' education given he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, or that he might have attended them in their temples. Hence, Pharaoh manipulates this distant relation, turning it on its head. Thus, instead of saying that Moses was their disciple, he says he was their master; this to make the situation look even more horrendous.

Pharaoh then threatens them with torture, magnifying what punishment he will inflict on those believers: *"In time you shall come to know. I shall most certainly have your hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, and I shall most certainly crucify you all."* (Verse 49) These are the same stupid measures to which every tyrant resorts when he feels his position or life threatened. Furthermore, Pharaoh displays no compunction about

it. He utters his words knowing that in his position of absolute power he can carry out his threats to the letter. What, then, would this small group of believers who have just seen the light of faith say in reply?

What they say is indeed inspiring. Their reply comes from their hearts: they have found true faith and will not exchange it for anything else. They realize that their newly-found relation with God enables them to totally disregard tyrant'. They now aspire to the true life of the hereafter, paying no heed whatsoever to what they may have to face in this life: *"They said: No harm [can you cause us]. To our Lord we shall indeed return. We certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed."* (Verses 50-51)

'You can cause us no harm!' That you may be able to cut our hands and feet off on alternate sides, or that you may crucify us does not mean that you can harm us. Indeed, even if you kill us all, you will not harm us, because we will return to our Lord. Whatever happens on this earth will end here. Our hopes and aspirations are all centred on what will happen in the life to come where we *"certainly hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins, since we are the first who have believed."*

What splendid effect faith has on a believer's mind, and how it brightens his soul, pouring reassurance and contentedness on it. Thus man, who originates from an essence of clay can attain the sublime.

When faith settles in the heart, it enriches it to the extent that all that this world can offer seems trivial and worthless.

Here, the curtains fall to retain both the effect of this splendid scene and its majestic rhythm. It is given here in this way so as to make it a lesson to be fully appreciated by the new Muslims in Makkah as they faced the Quraysh unbelievers' torture and persecution. It remains a lesson to all advocates of faith as they suffer persecution anywhere and in every generation.

Divine Care for True Believers

Thereafter, God looked after his faithful servants, while Pharaoh began raising his army, seeking to put his plans into effect:

> *Then We revealed to Moses: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will be pursued.' Pharaoh sent heralds to all cities, [saying]: 'These are but a small band, and most certainly they have enraged us; but we are all united, and well prepared.'* (Verses 52-56)

We have here a gap in the story during which certain events are omitted. Moses

and the Israelites lived for a period in Egypt during which the signs mentioned in *Sūrah* 7, The Heights, took place. It was later that God instructed Moses to leave Egypt with his people. All these events are omitted here so that the historical account better serves the theme of the *sūrah,* delivering its message most clearly.

What we know is that God instructed His messenger, Moses, to leave with his people, starting their flight by night after making all the necessary preparations and planning their departure well. God also told Moses that Pharaoh and his host would pursue them. He further commanded him to lead his people to the sea, most probably to the point where the Gulf of Suez stretches into the lakes area. Pharaoh soon learnt of the Children of Israel's night flight and he immediately ordered full mobilization of his troops, sending heralds and officials to other cities to enlist recruits, hoping to catch up with Moses and his people and undermine their efforts. Little did he realize that the plan he wanted to foil was God's own!

Pharaoh's agents went at full speed, recruiting and enlisting soldiers as they went. Yet Pharaoh also realized that such mobilization could give the impression of how worried he was, and that he recognized that Moses and his followers represented a serious threat. Otherwise, why would he, a king and a deity, need to initiate a full mobilization to counter their threat? Hence, he felt that he needed to assure his people that there was but little danger: *"These are but a small band!"* (Verse 54) This begs the question: why raise all this fuss, then? 'Why give them so much importance and mobilize such a large force? Hence, he has to further justify his action: *"Most certainly they have enraged us."* (Verse 55) They have perpetrated certain actions and made some inflammatory statements. However, *"we are all united, and well prepared."* (Verse 56) We realize how they are plotting against us, and we are in full control of the situation to ensure that they can do us no harm. This is just an example of how falsehood always finds itself at a loss when it encounters faith.

Before portraying the last scene of this encounter, the *sūrah* gives us an account of the ultimate consequences of leading Pharaoh and his people away from their riches and property. It also shows how the previously persecuted Children of Israel were able to enjoy all these things: *"Thus We drove them out of their gardens, springs, treasures and honourable positions. And We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel."* (Verses 57-59)

The Egyptians set out to pursue Moses and his people, but this was to be their last march. It was indeed an expulsion, driving them away from all the luxuries they had been enjoying, including their gardens, springs and treasures, never to return. This final outcome is mentioned here, ahead of sequence, in order to highlight the punishment meted out to those wrongdoers who perpetrate injustices.

It is not known in history that the Children of Israel returned to Egypt after they had so departed, aiming for the Holy Land. Nor is it known that they inherited the

kingdom of Egypt, Pharaoh's treasures and seat of power. Hence, commentators on the Qur'ān explain this Qur'ānic statement by saying that they inherited something similar, which means that they inherited the type of things enjoyed by Pharaoh and his entourage.

The Drowning of Pharaoh's Army

After this interpolation we are treated to the final, decisive scene:

> *And so they [i.e. Pharaoh's army] pursued them at sunrise. When the two hosts came in sight of each other, the followers of Moses said: 'We shall certainly be overtaken.' He replied: 'No indeed.' My Lord is with me and He will guide me.' And We revealed to Moses: 'Strike the sea with your staff' So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain. And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful.* (Verses 60-68)

So, Moses marched with his people at night, in accordance with God's plan. In the morning, Pharaoh and his soldiers began their chase. We then see the climax approaching, and the battle about to commence. Moses and his people find themselves close to the sea, without any boats which they could use to cross. They could not cross on foot, and they lacked the means to defend themselves. Pharaoh and his army were approaching, with his soldiers fully equipped, confident of their victory and intent on showing no mercy. All indications suggested a final tragedy for the small group with Moses: there was no escape, for the sea was ahead and the enemy to the rear. Hence they cried out: *"We shall certainly be overtaken."* (Verse 61)

It was a time of great stress about to reach its pinnacle. To those believers with Moses it looked as if in just a few minutes they would certainly be overtaken. They were certain that Pharaoh would indiscriminately deal death and that there would be no escape. But Moses, who had received God's revelations, does not entertain any such doubt. He has complete trust in God, believing that His help will be forthcoming. He is certain that God will save them, although he does not know how. Nevertheless, it is certain and God will guide him. Hence, his reply: *"No indeed! My Lord is with me and He will guide me."* (Verse 62)

We note the emphasis in his reply: *No indeed.'* We will not be overtaken and we will not suffer any persecution, because God will guide me and this is certain. At the last moment, a bright ray of hope is clearly seen against the long dark night of stress and despair, as the route ahead opens at a point no one has ever thought of: *"And We revealed to Moses: Strike the sea with your staff."* (Verse 63) The *sūrah* does not give us further details so as to say that he complied with the order and struck the sea with his staff. All this is clearly understood. The *sūrah* only gives us the result of his action: *"So it divided, and each part was like a massive mountain."* (Verse 63)

So the miracle was there for all to see. What people describe as impossible became a reality before their own eyes. People only think of natural laws according to what is familiar to them, but natural laws are created by God and He is able to make them operate in accordance with His will, at any moment of His choosing.

A miracle was enacted and the Children of Israel looked on. In between the waters of the sea, a passageway of dry land opened for them. The water stood still on both sides of the passage like great mountains, and the Israelites rushed to cross over. Pharaoh and his army stood there, overwhelmed at this miraculous event. After a long while, of watching in utter amazement, Pharaoh ordered his soldiers to chase them along the same route. Thus, God's will was done. As the Israelites were coming out at the other end, Pharaoh and his host were walking in between the two great bodies of water, drawing ever nearer to their deaths: *"And We caused the others to draw near, and We saved Moses and all who were with him, while We caused the others to drown."* (Verses 64-66)

This was a great sign for mankind, one which has remained the subject of much discussion by countless generations. Do many people believe in it? The answer comes from none other than God: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe."* (Verse 67) Miraculous signs do not necessarily lead to people's acceptance of the truth, even though they may forcibly submit to them. Faith is generated in people's hearts as divine guidance touches them.

"And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful." (Verse 68) This is the usual comment in this *sūrah* after mentioning God's signs and people's rejection of His messages.

3
No End to God's Blessings

Relate to them the story of Abraham, (69)

وَٱتۡلُ عَلَيۡهِمۡ نَبَأَ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ ﴿٦٩﴾

when he said to his father and his people: 'What is that you worship?' (70)

إِذۡ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوۡمِهِۦ مَا تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They answered: 'We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them.' (71)

قَالُواْ نَعۡبُدُ أَصۡنَامٗا فَنَظَلُّ لَهَا عَٰكِفِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

Said he: 'Do they hear you when you call on them, (72)

قَالَ هَلۡ يَسۡمَعُونَكُمۡ إِذۡ تَدۡعُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

or benefit you or do you harm?' (73)

أَوۡ يَنفَعُونَكُمۡ أَوۡ يَضُرُّونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

They said: 'But we found our forefathers doing the same.' (74)

قَالُواْ بَلۡ وَجَدۡنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا كَذَٰلِكَ يَفۡعَلُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

He said: 'Do you see those which you have been worshipping – (75)

قَالَ أَفَرَءَيۡتُم مَّا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

you and your forefathers of old? (76)

أَنتُمۡ وَءَابَآؤُكُمُ ٱلۡأَقۡدَمُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

They are my enemies, except for the Lord of all the worlds. (77)

فَإِنَّهُمۡ عَدُوّٞ لِّيٓ إِلَّا رَبَّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

'It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me. (78)

ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهۡدِينِ ﴿٧٨﴾

He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. (79)	وَٱلَّذِى هُوَ يُطۡعِمُنِى وَيَسۡقِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾
When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health, (80)	وَإِذَا مَرِضۡتُ فَهُوَ يَشۡفِينِ ﴿٨٠﴾
and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life. (81)	وَٱلَّذِى يُمِيتُنِى ثُمَّ يُحۡيِينِ ﴿٨١﴾
It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.' (82)	وَٱلَّذِىٓ أَطۡمَعُ أَن يَغۡفِرَ لِى خَطِيٓـَٔتِى يَوۡمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٨٢﴾
'My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous; (83)	رَبِّ هَبۡ لِى حُكۡمًا وَأَلۡحِقۡنِى بِٱلصَّـٰلِحِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾
and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations; (84)	وَٱجۡعَل لِّى لِسَانَ صِدۡقٍ فِى ٱلۡأَخِرِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾
place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss! (85)	وَٱجۡعَلۡنِى مِن وَرَثَةِ جَنَّةِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿٨٥﴾
Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray. (86)	وَٱغۡفِرۡ لِأَبِىٓ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٨٦﴾
Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; (87)	وَلَا تُخۡزِنِى يَوۡمَ يُبۡعَثُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾
the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; (88)	يَوۡمَ لَا يَنفَعُ مَالٌ وَلَا بَنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾
but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy] (89)	إِلَّا مَنۡ أَتَى ٱللَّهَ بِقَلۡبٍ سَلِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾
Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing; (90)	وَأُزۡلِفَتِ ٱلۡجَنَّةُ لِلۡمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾
whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error. (91)	وَبُرِّزَتِ ٱلۡجَحِيمُ لِلۡغَاوِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship (92)

وَقِيلَ لَهُمۡ أَيۡنَ مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡبُدُونَ ﴿٩٢﴾

instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' (93)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ هَلۡ يَنصُرُونَكُمۡ أَوۡ يَنتَصِرُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, (94)

فَكُبۡكِبُواْ فِيهَا هُمۡ وَٱلۡغَاوُۥنَ ﴿٩٤﴾

and Iblīs' hosts, all together. (95)

وَجُنُودُ إِبۡلِيسَ أَجۡمَعُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: (96)

قَالُواْ وَهُمۡ فِيهَا يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

'By God, we were obviously in error, (97)

تَٱللَّهِ إِن كُنَّا لَفِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٩٧﴾

when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. (98)

إِذۡ نُسَوِّيكُم بِرَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾

It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. (99)

وَمَآ أَضَلَّنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾

And now we have none to intercede for us (100)

فَمَا لَنَا مِن شَٰفِعِينَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

nor any loving friend. (101)

وَلَا صَدِيقٍ حَمِيمٖ ﴿١٠١﴾

Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (102)

فَلَوۡ أَنَّ لَنَا كَرَّةٗ فَنَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (103)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (104)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* has given us an account of Moses and Pharaoh and the latter's ultimate end. It gives hope to the believers suffering persecution in the world, as were the small group of Muslims in Makkah at the time. The story also portrays the destruction of arrogant tyrants whose attitude was basically similar to that of the idolaters in Makkah.

The *sūrah* now moves on to tell us about Abraham and his people. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is ordered to relate this story to the unbelievers. For they claimed to be the custodians of Abraham's heritage in so far as they followed his old faith, even though they addressed their worship to multiple deities. Indeed, they went even further, placing idols in the Sacred Mosque built by Abraham as a focus for the followers of the pure faith based on God's oneness. The Prophet is required to tell them Abraham's story so that they know whether their claims are right or not.

In this *Sūrah,* historical accounts are not given in their chronological order, because it is only concerned with the lessons to be derived from these accounts. In *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, conversely, the historical line of how power was assumed by different peoples and the succession of God's messengers since Adam were important points to stress. Hence, the accounts of earlier prophets there followed a strict chronological order, starting with man's fall from heaven to begin human life on earth.

The episode in Abraham's story given in this *sūrah* concentrates on the message he delivered to his people, the debate he had with them, his denunciation of their alleged deities, addressing all worship to God alone and his reminder of the Day of Judgement. This is followed by a complete scene from the Day of Judgement when idolaters will deny those very deities they used to worship, and regret their past actions that are certain to land them with a terrible end. It is all shown as if it is already happening now. The lesson the story delivers here is aimed primarily at the idolaters. Hence, the *sūrah* speaks at length on the basics of the monotheistic faith, the fallacy of polytheism, and the destiny of idolaters. All other aspects are only briefly hinted at, while they are nonetheless detailed in other *sūrahs.*

Other episodes in Abraham's life were given in *Sūrahs* 2, 6, 11, 14, 15, 19, 21 and 22. In each, the episode chosen is the one most suited to the main theme of the *sūrah.* In *Sūrah* 2, The Cow, for example, we read the episode of his building the Ka`bah, together with his son, Ishmael. He is shown praying to God to make Makkah, the Sacred City, secure. He is also shown declaring that the Muslims will be the true heirs of the Ka`bah and its builder, as they will be the ones who will follow his faith based on God's oneness. This is not an inheritance based on blood and ancestry. This

fact is given within the context of the Israelites' disobedience and denials and their expulsion by God who gave Abraham's heritage and the House he built to the Muslims.

In the same *sūrah* we have Abraham's debate with the unbeliever king when Abraham stressed God's power telling the king that God alone causes life and death, and that it is He who causes the sun to rise in the East. He challenged the king to make it rise in the West, thus ending all argument. Abraham is also shown in this *sūrah* praying to God to let him see how He brings the dead back to life. God ordered him to slay four birds and to place parts of each on different mountains. God then brought them back to life and they flew back to Abraham. All this is given in a context that concentrates on God's power, the signs He has placed in the universe and His ability to bring the dead back to life.

Sūrah 6, Cattle, describes Abraham searching for his Lord and how he recognized Him and His power after looking carefully at the stars, the moon and the sun, and reflecting on other universal phenomena. The entire *sūrah* concentrates on faith and universal signs pointing to God, the Creator, who has no partner whatsoever.

In *Sūrah 11,* Hūd, Abraham is given the happy news of the birth of his son, Isaac, but this is given as the *Sūrah* relates Lot's story and how the angels sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah visited Abraham on their way. The episode shows the care God takes of His chosen servants and how He deals with arrogant transgressors.

Sūrah 14, named Abraham, shows him praying by the Sacred Mosque, the Ka`bah, for his offspring whom he placed in a barren valley. He praises and thanks God for giving him his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, in his old age, and prays to Him to make him and his descendants people who attend regularly to their prayers. He further appeals to God to answer his supplications, forgive him, his parents and the believers on the Day of Reckoning. The whole context of this *sūrah* then is to show all followers of God's messengers as one community, believing in one message, that of God's oneness. Those who deny God's messengers are also shown to belong to one camp. The divine message is portrayed as a large tree providing shade in an arid climate of disbelief.

Sūrah 15, al-Ĥijr, relates the same episode given in *Sūrah* 11, with more detail, within the context of bestowing mercy on believers and inflicting punishment on unbelievers.

The episode given in *Sūrah* 19, Mary, concentrates on his gentle approach to his father, the latter's stiff reply, Abraham's moving away from his people, and how he was blessed with Ishmael and Isaac. All this comes in a *sūrah* that portrays God's care for His chosen servants, generating a clearly felt ambience of love and compassion.

In *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, we are shown how Abraham called on his father and

his people to believe in God, and how he denounced their idols and physically destroyed them. We are shown how he was thrown onto a fire and how, by God's command, it turned cool and comforting for him, and then how he and his nephew, the Prophet Lot, were saved and taken to the land God blessed for mankind. Again this comes within the context of showing the unity of the nation that follows God's messengers and how God takes care of this community as it addresses all its worship to Him alone.

Sūrah 22, The Pilgrimage, contains a reference to God's order that Abraham should cleanse and purify the Ka`bah for those who worship there.

Questioning Popular Beliefs

"Relate to them the story of Abraham, when he said to his father and his people: What is that you worship?" (Verses 69-70) The Prophet is instructed here to relate to them the story of Abraham whom the idolater Arabs considered themselves to be his heirs and the followers of his faith. The Prophet thus recounts how Abraham denounced what his father and people worshipped, which were no more than idols similar to those the unbelievers in Makkah worshipped. He also denounced their erring ways, asking them in a clear tone of disapproval: *What is that you worship?'*

"They answered: We worship idols, and we remain devoted to them." (Verse 71) They certainly considered their idols deities, but the fact that they called them idols shows that they could not deny the fact that they were no more than statues made of stone, but to which they nevertheless devoted their worship. This is the ultimate degree of absurdity. Yet when people take up wrong beliefs, they lose sight of the absurdity of their concepts, worship and statements.

Abraham (peace be upon him) begins to awaken their minds and hearts, highlighting the absurdity of their position: *"Said he: Do they hear you when you call on them, or benefit you or do you harm?"* (Verses 72-73) The least that should be true of a deity to whom worship is addressed is that it should have the same faculty of hearing as its worshipper. But these deities cannot hear their worshippers who appeal to them for benefit and the removal of harm and hardship. If they cannot hear, then how can they bring benefit or cause harm? Certainly the idolaters could not claim either quality for their idols. Hence, they did not answer Abraham because they realized that he was being sarcastic. Nevertheless, they could not refute what he said. Hence, when they do speak, they expose themselves as blind followers who do not reflect on their actions: *"They said: But we found our forefathers doing the same."* (Verse 74) True, these idols cannot hear, bring benefit or cause harm, but we found our forefathers worshipping them and we follow in their footsteps.

This is a disgraceful reply, but those idolaters were not ashamed to make it, nor

were the Arabs in Makkah ashamed of doing likewise. It was sufficient that their forefathers did something for them to then accept it as valid without question. Indeed a stumbling block in the way of the Islamic message was that the idolaters were required to abandon their forefathers' religion. This they did not want to do because it would detract from those ancestors' standing and constitute an acknowledgement that they were in error. This would be too disrespectful of their forefathers. Such otiose values are thus allowed to stand in the way of the truth. In times of inflexible obduracy people stick to such values in preference to the truth. Hence, they needed to be shaken violently in order to release their minds and faculties.

Patient and calm as he was, Abraham realized that the only way forward was to give them a real jolt, declaring his enmity to those idols and to the deviant beliefs that allowed such worship: *"He said: Do you see those which you have been worshipping – you and your forefathers of old? They are my enemies, except for the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 75-77)

The fact that his own father and people worshipped such deities did not stop him from parting company with them, making clear his hostility to their errant beliefs. Thus, the Qur'ān teaches believers that on the question of faith, no consideration is given to parents, ancestors or communities. The main bond is that of faith. Whatever else there is, is of secondary importance.

Abraham makes an exception in his hostility to what they and their ancestors worshipped, and this exception applies only to *'the Lord of all the worlds'.* It might be that some of their ancestors worshipped God before deviation crept into their faith. It might also be that some of them worshipped God alongside some other alleged deities. Hence, Abraham employs this precaution in order to make his statement precise, and this is only to be expected of Abraham when he speaks of faith.

Acknowledging God's Favours

Abraham then outlines the attributes of his Lord, the Lord of all the worlds, and the bond that exists between them at all times and in all situations. As we listen to his description we feel the close, inspirational relationship that acknowledges God's hand in everything that happens in life:

> *It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me. He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health, and will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life. It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement.* (Verses 78-82)

Abraham's description of his Lord and the bond between them imparts a feeling that every part of his constitution feels this bond. Hence, all his aspirations look to God with love and trust. It is as if Abraham actually sees his Lord and feels his grace with all his heart. As the Qur'ān quotes Abraham's description, it gives it a melodious tone, one that imparts a very relaxed atmosphere, spreading its soothing, tranquil air.

"It is He who has created me, and is the One who guides me." (Verse 78) He has originated me from where He knows but I know not. This means that He knows everything about me: my constitution, nature, functions, feelings, and ultimate destiny. He is the One to guide me and provide me with the line I should follow in life. It is as if Abraham feels himself like an elastic material which God shapes the way He likes, giving it whatever form He chooses. He submits himself to God with full trust, perfectly assured that he is on the right course.

"He is the One who gives me to eat and to drink. When I fall ill, He is the One who restores me to health." (Verses 79-80) These are aspects of the direct, compassionate and loving care Abraham feels his Lord takes of him in all situations of health and sickness. Abraham demonstrates the utmost standard of politeness with his Lord by not attributing any illness to Him, although he knows well that both sickness and health occur by God's will. He only attributes to Him the blessings he enjoys and the care he receives: his food and drink as well as his health.

Again it is God who *"will cause me to die and then will bring me back to life."* (Verse 81) This signifies complete faith that it is God who deals death, and that He is certain to bring the dead back to life.

"It is He also who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgement." (Verse 82) Abraham, a prophet and a messenger of God, who knows his Lord and feels his presence and care in such a way, acknowledging such a close relationship with Him, expresses his dearest hope that on the Day of Judgement, God will forgive him his faults. He does not entertain any thought that he is without fault. Indeed he acknowledges that he has these, but hopes to receive more of God's grace. He does not feel that his deeds, good as they may be, deserve any credit, but hopes for God's mercy and forgiveness. This is the best to hope for.

This statement combines feelings of God-consciousness, politeness and self-effacement. This is the right combination to truly appreciate the grace God bestows on us, which is great indeed, and the value of our actions, which is definitely petty.

In his description of his Lord, Abraham combines all the elements of true faith: God's oneness, acknowledgement that He conducts all the affairs of human life on earth including every minute detail, resurrection after death, reckoning, God's grace and man's failings.

His people denied these, as do all those who associate partners with God.

Prayer by a Devoted Worshipper

Now Abraham addresses a long, comprehensive and humble prayer to his Lord:

> *My Lord! Grant me sound judgement, and join me with the righteous; and grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations; place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss! Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray. Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy].* (Verses 83-89)

Nothing in Abraham's prayer concerns any aspect of the comforts and pleasures of this world, not even physical health. It looks to higher aspects, motivated by pure feelings. It is a prayer made by a heart which has true knowledge of God and, as a result, attributes little value to everything else. He has known God's grace and prays for more of it, and he entertains hopes and fears in accordance with his experience.

"My Lord! Grant me sound judgement." (Verse 83) Grant me the wisdom by which I recognize the truth and distinguish true from false values so that I will continue to follow the right course. *"And join me with the righteous."* (Verse 83) This is said by Abraham, the noble prophet whose devotion is exemplary. What self-effacing humility! What concern about falling short of what is expected, and what fear of a change of heart! How keen he is to just be among the righteous! He feels that he can only achieve this if God guides him to do the righteous deeds that will bring him into such ranks.

"And grant me the advocacy of the truth in later generations." (Verse 84) This is a supplication that hopes for extension in later generations, not through offspring, but through faith. What Abraham prays for is that he should have in later generations a true advocate who calls on people to follow the path of truth, bringing people back to the pure faith which he himself advocated. This may be the same prayer quoted elsewhere in the Qur'ān as it speaks of his building of the Ka`bah with his son Ishmael. They both prayed: *"'Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise."* (2: 127-129) God answered his prayer and gave him that advocate of the truth, sending those

people a Messenger to teach them the true faith and to purify them. Such an answer to Abraham's prayer came several thousand years later, which is a very long time in people's reckoning, but a time that is nonetheless appropriate in God's judgement.

"Place me among those who will inherit the garden of bliss!" (Verse 85) Having already prayed that he should join the ranks of the righteous, through guidance to do what is good, now Abraham prays to be one of those who will be admitted to the garden of bliss which is inherited only by God's righteous servants.

"Forgive my father; for he is among the ones who have gone astray." (Verse 86) He prays for his own and God's forgiveness of his father despite all the harsh treatment and serious threats he had received from him. He had promised his father that he would pray for his forgiveness and he certainly fulfilled his promise. Later, the Qur'ān makes clear that it is not permissible for a believer to pray for the forgiveness of anyone who associates partners with God, even though that person might be a close relative. The Qur'ān also clarifies that: *"Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him."* (9: 114) Abraham then realized that the true relation that should be observed is not that of blood; rather it is one of faith. This is an important aspect of correct Islamic education. The first bond that gives rise to any relation between two people is that of faith: if it is severed, then all relations are of little significance.

"Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]." (Verses 87-89) We appreciate the extent of Abraham's feeling about the hardships of the Day of Resurrection from his prayer not to be then disgraced. We also feel his humility before his Lord and his fear that he might have fallen short of what was expected of him. We also realize how profoundly he felt the nature of that great Day from his description of it: *"the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy]."* (Verses 88-89) He also realizes that the only value recognized on that Day is a sincerity which makes one's heart purely devoted to God, allowing no consideration or personal desire to detract from such devotion. This is the type of sound heart that is worthy of proper value. *"The Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit."* (Verse 88) Indeed, no other quality, property or consideration is of any benefit, because all are of a temporary nature and will inevitably come to an end. They may be coveted by people who try hard to possess such things in this life, but they are of no value in the ultimate reckoning.

A Question That Needs No Answer

We then have in the present passage a scene of the Day of Judgement, which was feared by Abraham. It is so vivid that he almost sees it with his own eyes as he addresses his humble prayer to God:

> *Paradise will be brought within sight of the God-fearing; whereas the blazing fire will be placed in full view of the ones lost in error. It shall be said to them: 'Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God? Can they help you or even help themselves?' They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together. And there, quarrelling with one another, they will say: By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds. It was only the truly guilty ones who led us astray. And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend. Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that we could be believers.' (Verses 90-102)*

The scene starts with an image of heaven being brought near, so as to be within sight of the God-fearing; those who actually remained apprehensive lest they might be made to suffer God's punishment. The fire of hell is also brought into full view of those who erred; those who strayed away from the right path and denied the Day of Judgement. As they stand within sight of hell, listening to stern rebukes for their bad deeds before they are thrown into hell, they will be first asked about the deities they used to worship. The question that will be put to them is: *"Where is now all that you used to worship instead of God?"* (Verses 9293) Where are they? *"Can they help you or even help themselves?"* (Verse 93) No answer is heard from them. Indeed none is expected. It is only a question given by way of rebuke. Hence: *"They will be hurled into hell, as also those who are lost in error, and Iblīs' hosts, all together."* (Verses 9495) The very word used here, *kubkibū,* translated as 'hurled into', suggests that they fall into it, one on top of another, with much noise as a result. It is the same as when a landslide occurs, immediately followed by further ones. These people who were lost in error are accompanied in hell with "Iblīs' *hosts, all together."* Indeed they are all part of Iblīs's hosts.

We are then made to listen to them as they speak in hell, saying to the false deities and the idols they worshipped: *"By God, we were obviously in error, when we deemed you equal to the Lord of all the worlds,"* (Verses 97-98), worshipping you, alongside or instead of God, as if you were equal to Him. They say it now when it is too late. They put the blame on those who led them into error and prevented them from listening to divine guidance. They now wake up to the realization that it is all too late and that apportioning blame will benefit them nothing: *"And now we have none to intercede for us nor any loving friend."* (Verses 100-101) Neither deity nor friend will be of any avail to us now. But then they think that if there were a possibility of returning to life, they could still mend their erring ways: *"Would that we had a second chance [in life], so that*

we could be believers." (Verse 102) This is nothing more than wishful thinking. There can be no return. They are already present on Judgement Day.

This is followed by the *sūrah's* standard comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 103-104) This comment is repeated in the *sūrah* every time the fate of any community that opposed God's messengers is shown, whether it be the `Ād, the Thamūd or Lot's people, and it also follows every sign given to any group who denied God and His messengers. The scene from the Day of Judgement that we have been discussing is shown here in place of a scene of punishment in this world. It shows the end faced by Abraham's people, and indeed the ultimate end of all idolatry. Hence, it delivers the same lesson in every historical account. We should remember that scenes of the Day of Judgement are shown in the Qur'ān as if they are taking place in front of our eyes so as to touch our hearts and souls in the same way as they are touched when reflecting on the fate of past communities.

4
Judgement Belongs to God

The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. (105)

كَذَّبَتۡ قَوۡمُ نُوحٍ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? (106)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ نُوحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (107)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ﴿١٠٧﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (108)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٠٨﴾

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (109)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا
عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

So, fear God and pay heed to me.' (110)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١١٠﴾

They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?' (111)

۞ قَالُوٓاْ أَنُؤۡمِنُ لَكَ وَٱتَّبَعَكَ ٱلۡأَرۡذَلُونَ
﴿١١١﴾

Said he: 'What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? (112)

قَالَ وَمَا عِلۡمِي بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. (113)

إِنۡ حِسَابُهُمۡ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّيۖ لَوۡ تَشۡعُرُونَ ﴿١١٣﴾

I am not one to drive away the believers. (114)

وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِطَارِدِ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

I am only a plain warner.' (115)

إِنْ أَنَا۠ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١١٥﴾

Said they: 'Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death.' (116)

قَالُوا۟ لَئِن لَّمْ تَنتَهِ يَـٰنُوحُ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمَرْجُومِينَ ﴿١١٦﴾

He prayed: 'My Lord! My people have denied me. (117)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنَّ قَوْمِى كَذَّبُونِ ﴿١١٧﴾

So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me.' (118)

فَٱفْتَحْ بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَهُمْ فَتْحًا وَنَجِّنِى وَمَن مَّعِىَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١١٨﴾

So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, (119)

فَأَنجَيْنَـٰهُ وَمَن مَّعَهُۥ فِى ٱلْفُلْكِ ٱلْمَشْحُونِ ﴿١١٩﴾

and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown. (120)

ثُمَّ أَغْرَقْنَا بَعْدُ ٱلْبَاقِينَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (121)

إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٢١﴾

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (122)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٢٢﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* as we have seen recounts Abraham's story after it had given a more detailed one of Moses, thus going back in history. Now it goes further back to tell us about Noah and his people. The chronological order is not important here because the focus is on the ultimate end of idolatry, on the end of denials of the divine message.

Like the accounts of Moses and Abraham, Noah's story is referred to in several *sūrahs.* It was given, in brief, in *sūrah 7,* The Heights, within the context of a historical account of God's messengers and their messages. There it followed Adam's fall from

heaven, concentrating on Noah's advocacy of God's oneness and his warning to his people that they were risking grievous suffering. They accused him of being deep in error, expressing their amazement that God should send them a human messenger. Their punishment by drowning is mentioned but without going into any detail.

In *Sūrah 10,* Jonah, the story is given in brief, concentrating on the end of his mission when he challenged his people, yet they still denied him. He was saved with those who followed him, while the others were drowned.

Sūrah 11, Hūd, provides many more details about the flood, the ark and what happened after the flood. It mentions, for example, Noah's prayer for his son who was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. In this *sūrah* we are also given an account of the sort of debate his people had with him about God's oneness.

In *Sūrah* 23, The Believers, Noah's account concentrates on his call to people to worship God alone, and their objection to the fact that he is a mere mortal like them. They accuse him of wanting to press his favoured position. They claim that God could have sent angels, and they accuse Noah of madness. He turns to God, appealing for support. Then follows a very brief reference to the ark and the flood.

In many instances, like the present *sūrah,* Noah's story is given together with stories of the `Ād, Thamūd, Lot's people and the Madyan. The prominent features of the account given here are Noah's call on his people to fear God and his declaration that he expects nothing by way of reward. Also important is his refusal to expel the poor who believe in God at the request of those who consider themselves noble. This was also demanded of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) by the elders of the Quraysh in Makkah. We are also told of Noah's appeal to God to judge between him and his community, and God's response which resulted in the drowning of the unbelievers.

When Believers are the Lowest in Society

"The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers." (Verse 105) This is the end of the story, but it is given at the beginning so as to add extra emphasis, before moving on to give the details of the story.

The fact is that Noah's people denied him only, but they are described here as denying God's messengers, because the message is one, summed up in the call to acknowledge God's oneness and to worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. Therefore, whoever rejects it denies all God's messengers as they advocated one and the same message. The Qur'ān stresses this fact in several places and in different forms, because it is a basic principle of the Islamic faith. It, thus, brings the divine faith throughout human history under one umbrella, dividing mankind

throughout all generations into two groups: believers and unbelievers. A Muslim considers that the community of believers in every divine religion, from the beginning of human life to the advent of the final divine message of Islam, as his own community. A believer accepts all God's messengers, believes in their messages and looks upon them all with the highest respect, because they all preached the same message of God's oneness.

From a Muslim's perspective, mankind are not divided into races, colours and nationalities. They are divided into the people of the truth and the people of falsehood. His own stand is with the people of the truth. This gives Muslims one criterion that applies to all history. His values are much higher than bonds of race, colour, language, country and present or past kinship. His values are embodied into the bond of faith which is the basis of mankind's accountability:

> *The people of Noah, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Noah said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. So, fear God and pay heed to me.'* (Verses 105-110)

Such was Noah's message which his people denied, despite his being their brother. Such brotherhood should have ensured a peaceful relationship, leading to their belief in him and his message. But his people had no time for this bond of brotherhood, and they did not soften to their brother's call when he said to them: *"Will you have no fear of God?"* (Verse 106) Will you not worry about the end to which your attitudes and actions lead you?

This directive and reminder to fear God is consistent in this *sūrah.* We saw it with Pharaoh and his people as God informed Moses of his assignment. Then every prophet that succeeded Noah said the same thing to his community: *"I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust."* (Verse 107) He would not cheat, defraud or act dishonestly. He would not add to, or withhold anything from what he was required to deliver to his people: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 108) In this case, Noah again reminds his people to fear God, giving it a more express definition this time. He appeals to their consciences to obey him as he calls on them to surrender themselves to God.

He then reassures them that he was neither looking for any worldly gain nor seeking any wage in return for advocating the divine message and guiding them to their Lord. He seeks only God's reward, because it was He who gave him his message. This assurance of seeking no gain or wage seems to have always been necessary for sincere advocacy of faith. It is, thus, distinguished from the familiar

pattern of religion as exploited by clerics and religious orders for personal gain and enrichment.

Now that he has reassured them of having no personal ambition, Noah again tells them to fear God, reminding them that they should obey him: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 110) Their response, a singular objection, was the same given to all messengers: "*They said: Are we to believe in you, even though only the lowest of the low follow you?"* (Verse 111)

What they meant was that it was only the poor who followed him, because the poor are normally the first to accept divine messages and messengers. They are quick to believe in God and submit themselves to Him, because they are not deterred by any hollow status or fear of losing any interest or position as a result. The chiefs and nobles of society often fear for their interests that are based on false considerations, as also myths and legends that are given religious status. Moreover, they are unwilling to accept complete equality with the masses as a result of believing in God's oneness. Under such a belief system only faith and good action are given an appropriately high value, with the net result that some people rise and others fall by the single standard of faith that is complemented by good action.

Noah's reply, therefore, establishes true values, defining the mission of God's messenger and leaves judgement on people to God who knows best their intentions, thoughts and actions:

> *Said he: What knowledge do I have as to what they used to do in the past? Their reckoning rests with none other than my Lord, if you could but understand. I am not one to drive away the believers. I am only a plain warner.* (Verses 112-115)

The nobility always speak in a derogative manner about the poor. They say that their habits and values are not acceptable to those who are in the higher echelons of society. They have nothing of their refinements. Noah tells them that he does not ask of people anything other than that they believe in God. Their actions are left to God to evaluate and to determine their appropriate reward. His, God's, is the right evaluation. Noah then defines his own mission: *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 115)

With such clear argument and plain logic, Noah's people were silenced. They had no meaningful reply to offer. Hence, they resorted to the same method to which tyranny resorts every time it finds itself cornered; they threatened him with brute force: *"Said they: Noah! If you will not desist, you will surely be stoned to death."* (Verse 116) Thus tyranny reveals its ghastly and cruel face.

Noah realized that their hardened hearts would not soften. Therefore, he turned to the One source of support that is always available to believers, never failing them:

"He prayed: My Lord! My people have denied me. So, judge decisively between me and them, and save me and those of the believers who are with me." (Verses 117-118) His Lord certainly knew that his people had denied him and accused him of lying, but Noah needed to address his complaint to God, appealing to Him for justice. Thus, he puts the matter in His hands: *"Judge decisively between me and them."* (Verse 118) Such decisive judgement will put an end to tyranny and injustice: *"And save me and those of the believers who are with me."* (Verse 118)

God certainly responded to His messenger's plea for help: *"So We saved him, and those with him, in the laden ark, and We caused the others who stayed behind to drown."* (Verses 119-120) Thus, the end of this very early battle in human history between faith and unfaith is described in a very quick sequence of words, which also tell of the outcome of every subsequent battle between the two sides in human history.

We then have the *sūrah's* now familiar comment that follows every one of God Almighty's signs: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 121-122)

5
How the Mighty Fall

The `Ād, too, denied God's messengers. (123)

كَذَّبَتۡ عَادٌ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ۝١٢٣

Their brother Hūd said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (124)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ هُودٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ۝١٢٤

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (125)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ۝١٢٥

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (126)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ۝١٢٦

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (127)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ۝١٢٧

'Do you build a landmark on every high place, in a vain endeavour, (128)

أَتَبۡنُونَ بِكُلِّ رِيعٍ ءَايَةٗ تَعۡبَثُونَ ۝١٢٨

and make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal? (129)

وَتَتَّخِذُونَ مَصَانِعَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَخۡلُدُونَ ۝١٢٩

When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants. (130)

وَإِذَا بَطَشۡتُم بَطَشۡتُمۡ جَبَّارِينَ ۝١٣٠

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (131)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ۝١٣١

Fear Him who has provided you with all that you know. (132)

وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَمَدَّكُم بِمَا تَعۡلَمُونَ ۝١٣٢

He has provided you with cattle and children, (133)

أَمَدَّكُم بِأَنۡعَٰمٖ وَبَنِينَ ۝١٣٣

and gardens and springs. (134)	وَجَنَّٰتٖ وَعُيُونٖ ١٣٤
Indeed, I fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' (135)	إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيۡكُمۡ عَذَابَ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ١٣٥
They answered: 'It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition. (136)	قَالُواْ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيۡنَآ أَوَعَظۡتَ أَمۡ لَمۡ تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلۡوَٰعِظِينَ ١٣٦
This is none but the practice of the ancients. (137)	إِنۡ هَٰذَآ إِلَّا خُلُقُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ١٣٧
Never are we going to be punished.' (138)	وَمَا نَحۡنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ ١٣٨
Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (139)	فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَهۡلَكۡنَٰهُمۡۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ١٣٩
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (140)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٤٠

Power and a Sense of Immortality

The Prophet Hūd's people lived in al-Aĥqāf, an area of extensive sand dunes not far from Ĥadramowt and in the direction of Yemen. They lived sometime after Noah, and were one of the communities that deviated from the right way sometime after the flood that punished Noah's people.

Hūd's story was told in more detail in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights, and *Sūrah 11, Hūd.* It is also mentioned in .*Sūrah* 23, The Believers, without mentioning the names of Had or his community. The story here is summed up between Hūd's address to his community that encouraged them to believe in God's oneness and the end they faced as God's punishment befell them.

The story of Had and his people has the same beginning as Noah's story:

> *The `Ād, too, denied God's messengers. Their brother Hid said to them: Will you have no fear of God? I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. So, fear God and pay heed to me. No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 123-127)

It is the same message given by every messenger of God: it is a call to believe in God alone and to fear Him and obey His messenger. This is coupled with a declaration disclaiming any interest in worldly luxuries or position the people may have to offer. This puts things in the right perspective. The messenger seeks nothing from them, but instead he looks to God for his reward.

Had follows this declaration by examining their own particular conditions and behaviour. He criticizes the fact that they build lofty buildings to demonstrate their ability, taking pride in their wealth. He denounces their arrogance which results from their material power and the resources that enable them to use different forces and means, in total disregard of God, oblivious to the fact of their accountability to Him: *"Do you build a landmark on every high place, in a vain endeavour, and make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verses 128-129)

It seems that they used to build on high places so as to make such structures appear from a distance as grand landmarks. They did so to emphasize their superiority and great ability. Hence the Qur'ān describes it as a *vain endeavour'.* Had it been intended as a landmark or a sign to show direction, it would not have been described as such. The Qur'ānic statement, then, implies the need to direct one's resources and abilities to what is of benefit, not merely to show off and demonstrate abilities and wealth. It also appears that the people of `Ād were well advanced in industry, using machinery to carve positions for their palaces which they built on mountains. This is indicated in Hūd's saying to them: *"and [you] make for yourselves strong structures, hoping to be immortal?"* (Verse 129) It even occurred to them that such strong structures built with the use of heavy machinery could spare their lives, and protect them from severe atmospheric conditions as also from enemy attack.

They have further practices that are strongly criticized by Had: *"When you exercise your power, you do so like cruel tyrants."* (Verse 130) They were mighty, hard, tyrannical and would deal with others using utmost cruelty, like many others who rely on material power.

Had, therefore, reminds them that they must fear God and obey His messenger. This would be sure to redress their cruelty and put a stop to their arrogance: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me."* (Verse 131) He further reminds them of God's grace, as it is He who has favoured them with His blessings which they use arrogantly as also to oppress others. They should have remembered God's favours and given thanks for them. They should also bear in mind that the One who has granted them such

favours can easily take them back, or punish them for putting His favours to wrong use: *"Fear Him who has provided you with all that you know. He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs. Indeed, 1 fear lest suffering befall you on an awesome day."* (Verses 132-135)

Hūd's reminder mentions first the One who granted them such blessings before enumerating them. He *"has provided you with all that you know."* It is all a gift for you, and you know it well as you benefit by it in your lives. He then gives further details: *"He has provided you with cattle and children, and gardens and springs."* (Verses 133-134)

These were the best favours that they could have enjoyed during that period of time. They are indeed a great favour at any time. He then warns them against punishment that may befall them on an awesome day. His warning expresses his fear for their end, because he is one of them, their brother, and he wants to spare them the hardship of that day which is certain to come.

But his reminders and warnings do not touch their hardened hearts. They stubbornly refuse to mend their ways: *"They answered: It is all one to us whether you admonish us or you never give admonition."* (Verse 136) This is a derogatory way of speaking, one which expresses their carelessness for whatever he might say. They add a clear indication that they are hardened in their ways, relying totally on what they have inherited from previous generations: *"This is none but the practice of the ancients. Never are we going to be punished."* (Verses 137-138) Their only argument in defence of all the practices Hūd has criticized them for is that they are following earlier generations, towing their line. They then deny the possibility of being punished for following in their ancestors' footsteps: *"Never are we going to be punished."* (Verse 138)

The *sūrah* does not mention here any of the arguments that took place between them and Hūd. It proceeds straight to the end: *"Thus they denied him. So We destroyed them."* (Verse 139) These two short sentences, expressed in the original Arabic text by only two words, *fakadhdhabūhu fa'ahlaknāhum,* spell out the end of the mighty people of `Ād and their great symbols of power. Nothing is left of their luxuries, cattle, children, gardens and springs.

How many a community has followed the same practices as the `Ād people, moving further away from God with every new aspect of civilization they have achieved. They always think that man can be independent of God. They try to produce weapons to destroy others while ensuring their own security. Yet it may be only a day or a night and such a community finds itself subjected to God's punishment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 139-140)

6
A Blatant Challenge to God

The Thamūd, too, denied God's messengers. (141)

كَذَّبَتۡ ثَمُودُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٤١

Their brother Ṣāliḥ said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (142)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ صَٰلِحٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ١٤٢

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (143)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ١٤٣

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (144)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ١٤٤

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (145)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٤٥

Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, (146)

أَتُتۡرَكُونَ فِي مَا هَٰهُنَآ ءَامِنِينَ ١٤٦

among gardens and springs (147)

فِي جَنَّٰتٖ وَعُيُونٖ ١٤٧

and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? (148)

وَزُرُوعٖ وَنَخۡلٖ طَلۡعُهَا هَضِيمٞ ١٤٨

You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill. (149)

وَتَنۡحِتُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡجِبَالِ بُيُوتٗا فَٰرِهِينَ ١٤٩

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (150)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿١٥٠﴾

And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses(151)

وَلَا تُطِيعُوٓاْ أَمۡرَ ٱلۡمُسۡرِفِينَ ﴿١٥١﴾

– who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights.' (152)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا يُصۡلِحُونَ ﴿١٥٢﴾

They said: 'You are but one who has been bewitched. (153)

قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسَحَّرِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾

You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth.' (154)

مَآ أَنتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٞ مِّثۡلُنَا فَأۡتِ بِـَٔايَةٍ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٥٤﴾

He said: 'Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. (155)

قَالَ هَٰذِهِۦ نَاقَةٞ لَّهَا شِرۡبٞ وَلَكُمۡ شِرۡبُ يَوۡمٖ مَّعۡلُومٖ ﴿١٥٥﴾

Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day.' (156)

وَلَا تَمَسُّوهَا بِسُوٓءٖ فَيَأۡخُذَكُمۡ عَذَابُ يَوۡمٍ عَظِيمٖ ﴿١٥٦﴾

But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful. (157)

فَعَقَرُوهَا فَأَصۡبَحُواْ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿١٥٧﴾

So the suffering befell them. Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (158)

فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿١٥٨﴾

And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (159)

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٥٩﴾

Warnings Unheeded

The same call is repeated by every messenger. The *sūrah* deliberately uses the same words as it reports what each messenger said to his people. Thus it stresses the unity of the message in its basis and essence: namely, belief in God's oneness, fearing Him and obeying His messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds what was special in the Thamūd's case. They used to inhabit an area known as al-Ĥijr, in north Arabia, between the Ĥijāz and Syria. The Prophet and his companions passed through this area on their way to Tabūk, seeing the ruined city for themselves. In this account of their history we see their brother, Şāliĥ, reminding them of the blessings God has favoured them with and warning them against their being withdrawn from them. He also warns them of the impending reckoning and accountability: *"Will you be left secure [forever] in the midst of what you have here, among gardens and springs and plantations and palm-trees laden with ripe fruit? You carve dwellings out of the mountains with great skill."* (Verses 146-149)

They enjoy such luxury as Şāliĥ describes here, but they pay no attention to it and how it came about. Nor do they express any gratitude to the One who has blessed them with it. Hence, their brother describes this in full to awaken their hearts so that they will appreciate it and fear its withdrawal. What he says to them alerts slumbering minds: *"Will you be left secure in the midst of what you have here?"* (Verse 146) Do you think that you will be left to enjoy this luxury you have been blessed with? Such luxury is given a further air of splendour as it is left unspecified. Do you, then, feel secure that it can never be terminated or withdrawn? Will you be left in such gardens, springs, plantations and palm trees that give you dates so ripe that are very easy to digest? Will you be left in these homes you skilfully carve out in rocky mountains, giving them an extra air of splendour?

Having touched their hearts with this reminder, Şāliĥ calls on them to fear God, remain obedient and separate themselves from those who pay no heed to what is right and indulge instead in corruption: *"So, fear God and pay heed to me. And pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses — who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things to rights."* (Verses 150-152)

His words, however, do not touch their hardened hearts, and they pay no attention to him: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched. You are only a human being like us. So bring us a sign if you are a man of truth."* (Verses 153-154) They first describe him as one bewitched and, as such, one who does not know what he is talking about. It is as though only a madman will call on his people to worship God alone.

"You are only a human being like us." (Verse 154) Whenever a messenger of God addressed them, people were always troubled by this point. They always had a flawed concept of what a messenger should be like. They could not understand

God's wisdom of choosing ordinary people as His messengers, nor could they appreciate the honour God grants to mankind by choosing His messengers from among themselves, making them the leaders that receive light and guidance from Him. They felt that a messenger of God should be of a different type of creation, since he brings them information from on high, and tells them of the realm that lies beyond their perception. The fact is that humanity is incapable of appreciating that God so honoured such a man, giving him the ability to be in direct contact with the Supreme Society while still on earth. A man like others, going about his life in a normal way: eating, drinking, sleeping, marrying, walking about the streets and market places, and experiencing all the desires and feelings that occur to everyone else.

Across all generations people demanded from each messenger a miracle to prove that he was truly sent by God: *"Bring us a sign if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 154) Thus, the Thamūd demanded a miracle and God responded to His servant, Şāliĥ, giving him a sign in the form of a she-camel. We will not try to give details of its physical appearance, as have some commentators on the Qur'ān, because we have no authentic reliable source giving such a description. Instead, we will only say that she was a miracle, just as the Thamūd had asked for: *"He said: Here is a she-camel: she shall have her drinking share, and you shall have your drinking share, each on an appointed day. Do not harm her, lest suffering befall you on an awesome day."* (Verses 155-156)

Thus, Şāliĥ produced the she-camel making it a condition that the water where they took their cattle to drink should be divided between them, leaving it all for the she-camel one day and taking whatever they wanted from it on the following day. They would not trespass her rights on her day, and she would not come near them on their day. Thus, her days and her drinking were separate from theirs. He warned them against doing her any harm, for that would ensure that a mighty suffering would befall them.

What did this miraculous sign do to the stubborn and arrogant Thamūd? It did nothing to inspire their hardened hearts to accept the true faith. Nor did it give light to their souls living in darkness. The challenge the camel represented was there for them to meet, but they did not care. Nor did they even fulfil their pledges: *"But they cruelly slew her; then they became regretful."* (Verse 157) The ones who actually slew her were those who had spread corruption in the land.

Şāliĥ had given them clear warnings, delivering these very seriously, but they feared nothing. Hence, the offence was shared by them all, as also the punishment. They regretted their crime, but such regret was too late. Hence, *"So the suffering befell them."* (Verse 158) No details are given of the punishment in order to give an impression of the speed of events.

Then the *sūrah* concludes this passage with its usual comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 158-159)

7
Perversion Leading to Ruin

The people of Lot, too, denied God's messengers. (160)

كَذَّبَتۡ قَوۡمُ لُوطٍ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٦٠

Their brother Lot said to them: Will you have no fear of God? (161)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ أَخُوهُمۡ لُوطٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ١٦١

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (162)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ١٦٢

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (163)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ١٦٣

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (164)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا
عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٦٤

Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, (165)

أَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلذُّكۡرَانَ مِنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٦٥

and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.'(166)

وَتَذَرُونَ مَا خَلَقَ لَكُمۡ رَبُّكُم مِّنۡ أَزۡوَٰجِكُمۚ
بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٌ عَادُونَ ١٦٦

Said they: 'Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled.' (167)

قَالُواْ لَئِن لَّمۡ تَنتَهِ يَٰلُوطُ لَتَكُونَنَّ مِنَ
ٱلۡمُخۡرَجِينَ ١٦٧

He said: 'I am one who utterly abhors

قَالَ إِنِّي لِعَمَلِكُم مِّنَ ٱلۡقَالِينَ ١٦٨

your doings. (168)	رَبِّ نَجِّنِى وَأَهۡلِى مِمَّا يَعۡمَلُونَ ١٦٩
My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do.' (169)	فَنَجَّيۡنَٰهُ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ أَجۡمَعِينَ ١٧٠
So We saved him and all his family (170)	إِلَّا عَجُوزٗا فِى ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ١٧١
except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind. (171)	ثُمَّ دَمَّرۡنَا ٱلۡأٓخَرِينَ ١٧٢
Then We utterly destroyed the others, (172)	وَأَمۡطَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهِم مَّطَرٗاۖ فَسَآءَ مَطَرُ ٱلۡمُنذَرِينَ ١٧٣
and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]. (173)	إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَةٗۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكۡثَرُهُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ١٧٤
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (174)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٧٥
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (175)	

Arrogant Perverts

The story of the Prophet Lot and his people is mentioned at this juncture, although from a historical point of view it should link up with Abraham's story. But the historical sequence is not of importance in this *sūrah* which concentrates on the unity of the divine message, the method followed by all prophets and the fate of the communities addressed by these messages. Hence, the saving of the believers is highlighted alongside the doom suffered by those who opposed God's messengers, denying their messages.

Lot begins with his people in the same way as Noah, Hūd and Ṣāliĥ, denouncing their carelessness, trying to awaken their consciences, and reminding them that they need to be God-fearing. He calls on them to believe in God and to obey him, assuring them that he will not charge them anything for guiding them to the right path. He

follows this with a clear denunciation of their wicked perversion which made them a community apart in human history:

> *Of all the creatures in the world, will you lustfully approach males, and eschew the wives God has created for you? You are indeed people who transgress all bounds.* (Verses 165-166)

Lot's people, who inhabited several villages in the Jordan Valley, were known for their sinful practice of homosexuality, which reflects a wicked perversion of human nature. God has created human males and females, making each sex naturally inclined to the other in order for human life to progress through procreation. This mutual inclination is, then, part of the universal law that ensures balance and harmony among all creatures in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, and makes them cooperate in the fulfilment of God's will that governs the entire universe. When a man has sex with another man, their practice neither fulfils any objective nor serves the nature of the universe and its laws. It is indeed singular that anyone should find pleasure in such a practice. The pleasure a man finds with a woman is indeed the means through which human nature fulfils God's will. Thus, the deviation from natural law is clear in Lot's people's actions. Hence, it was inevitable that they should refrain from their deviation or be destroyed.

Their destruction was due to the fact that they had opted out of the normal way of life and the right line of human nature. They abandoned the very purpose of their existence, which is the preservation of human life through marriage and procreation.

When Lot called on them to abandon their perversion, denouncing their neglect of the spouses God created for them and their aggression against human nature, their response clearly showed that they were not ready to return to the path that ensured the continuity of human life: *"Said they: Lot! If you will not desist, you will most certainly be expelled."* (Verse 167)

Lot did not belong to them by lineage. He had accompanied his uncle, Abraham, when the latter withdrew from his people and migrated. Abraham, Lot and the small number of people who believed with them crossed the Jordan. He then lived among those people until God chose him as His messenger, requiring him to call on people to return to the right path. Their response was a threat that they would drive him out of their towns unless he abandoned his call.

When things reached this point and the threat became serious, Lot spoke out loud, making it clear that he loathed their disgusting perversion: *"He said: I am one who utterly abhors your doings."* (Verse 168) He used words that vividly describe his repugnance of their practices, before adding a prayer to God to save him and his family from such evil: *"My Lord! Save me and my family from what they do."* (Verse 169)

He did not do what they did, but by his upright nature he felt it to be a way of life leading to ruin. Since he was in their midst he prayed that God would save him and his family from what was bound to come about as a result of such action.

God responded to his prayer: *"So We saved him and all his family except an old woman, who was among those who stayed behind."* (Verses 170-171) This old woman was his wife as mentioned in other *sūrahs.* She was a terrible woman who helped others in their wickedness.

"Then We utterly destroyed the others, and rained down upon them a [devastating] rain. Dire indeed was the rain that fell upon those who were warned [to no avail]." (Verses 172-173) It is reported that their villages were sunk into the ground and covered with water. One of these was Sodom, the ruins of which are thought to be under the Dead Sea in Jordan. Some geologists confirm that the Dead Sea covers towns that were fully populated at one time. Some archaeologists have discovered the remains of a fort close to the Dead Sea, as well as an alter close to it where offerings were made. However, the Qur'ān gives us Lot's story and whatever the Qur'ān states is the truth telling exactly what happened. Their end is followed by the usual comment: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 174-175)

8
Fair Dealings for All

كَذَّبَ أَصۡحَٰبُ لۡـَٔيۡكَةِ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ١٧٦

The dwellers of the wooded dales [of Madyan], too, denied God's messengers. (176)

إِذۡ قَالَ لَهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ١٧٧

Their brother Shu`ayb said to them: 'Will you have no fear of God? (177)

إِنِّي لَكُمۡ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٞ ١٧٨

I am a Messenger [sent by Him] to you, worthy of all trust. (178)

فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ١٧٩

So, fear God and pay heed to me. (179)

وَمَآ أَسۡـَٔلُكُمۡ عَلَيۡهِ مِنۡ أَجۡرٍۖ إِنۡ أَجۡرِيَ إِلَّا
عَلَىٰ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٨٠

No reward whatever do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of all the worlds. (180)

۞ أَوۡفُواْ ٱلۡكَيۡلَ وَلَا تَكُونُواْ مِنَ
ٱلۡمُخۡسِرِينَ ١٨١

Give full measure; and be not of those who give others less [than their due]; (181)

وَزِنُواْ بِٱلۡقِسۡطَاسِ ٱلۡمُسۡتَقِيمِ ١٨٢

and weigh with even scales; (182)

وَلَا تَبۡخَسُواْ ٱلنَّاسَ أَشۡيَآءَهُمۡ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ
فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ١٨٣

and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption; (183)

وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَكُمۡ وَٱلۡجِبِلَّةَ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ
١٨٤

and fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old.' (184)

They said: 'You are but one who has been bewitched. (185)	قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مِنَ ٱلْمُسَحَّرِينَ ﴿١٨٥﴾
You are only a human being like us! And, indeed, we believe that you are lying. (186)	وَمَآ أَنتَ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُنَا وَإِن نَّظُنُّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلْكَـٰذِبِينَ ﴿١٨٦﴾
Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth.' (187)	فَأَسْقِطْ عَلَيْنَا كِسَفًا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّـٰدِقِينَ ﴿١٨٧﴾
Answered he: 'My Lord knows fully well all that you do.' (188)	قَالَ رَبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨٨﴾
But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was truly the suffering of an awesome day. (189)	فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَهُمْ عَذَابُ يَوْمِ ٱلظُّلَّةِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٨٩﴾
Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. (190)	إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَةً ۖ وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٩٠﴾
And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful. (191)	وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿١٩١﴾

Widespread Corruption

This passage tells the story of the Prophet Shu`ayb which, from a historical point of view, comes before that of Moses, but it is told here for the lessons involved in all the stories given in this *sūrah.* The dwellers of the 'wooded dales' were most probably the people of Madyan. It seems that Madyan was close to this wooded land, thick with trees, as the Qur'ānic description implies. Madyan lies close to the Gulf of `Aqaba, in the area between the Ĥijāz province of Saudi Arabia and Palestine.

Shu`ayb began in the same way as other prophets calling on people, explaining to them the basic essentials of faith, and making it clear that he sought no gain in return for his advocacy. He then spoke to them about the ills that plagued their own society:

"Give full measure, and be not of those who give others less [than their duel; and weigh with even scales; and do not deprive others of what rightfully belongs to them; and do not act wickedly on earth spreading corruption." (Verses 181-183)

As clearly mentioned in *Sūrahs 7* and 11, The Heights and Hūd respectively, they used to give people short measure whenever they weighed things out for them. They also used their power to take more than what was rightly theirs, while they would give people less than what was due to them. They would buy things for less than their fair price, but would sell for higher prices. It appears that they lived close to the caravan trade routes, and this enabled them to dictate their terms. The messenger God sent them counselled them to pursue fairness in all such dealings. He preached the true faith which inevitably requires good treatment of others, and which cannot overlook injustice in dealings and interactions between people.

Shu`ayb then appealed to their sense of the fear of God as he reminded them of the Creator who brought them into existence as He did with all past generations: *"Fear Him who has created you as well as the countless generations of old."* (Verse 184)

Their response was absurd. They accused him of being bewitched, speaking all sorts of nonsense without knowing what he said: *"They said: You are but one who has been bewitched."* (Verse 185) They also questioned the fact that he was God's messenger, since he was a man of their own kind. To them, a messenger of God should be different. Hence, they accused him of telling lies: *"You are only a human being like us! And, indeed, we believe that you are lying."* (Verse 186) They further challenged him to put his warnings into effect, bringing God's punishment upon them, demanding that he should cause the sky to fall upon them: *"Cause, then, fragments of the sky to fall down on us, if you are a man of truth."* (Verse 187)

Such a challenge could only be made by careless people who think little of the consequences. It is akin to the challenge the idolaters in Makkah put to the Prophet when he called on them to believe. But Shu`ayb chose not to answer their thoughtless challenge. He limited his reply to simply saying: *"My Lord knows fully well all that you do."* (Verse 188)

The *sūrah* moves straight on to tell us about the end they met, but without adding any detail: *"But they denied him. Thus suffering overtook them on the day of the darkening cloud. It was indeed the suffering of an awesome day."* (Verse 189)

It is reported that they first suffered very hot weather that made breathing difficult and which weighed heavily on their lungs. Then they saw a cloud, which they welcomed and sought the shade it provided, feeling the coolness it initially gave them. But soon a great thunderbolt destroyed them all. This was the 'day of the darkening cloud', as the cloud was its most distinctive mark.

This is followed by the same conclusion given in the *sūrah* after each of the stories

of past communities it mentions: *"Indeed, there is in this a sure sign; yet most of them will not believe. And indeed it is your Lord who is the Mighty One, the Merciful."* (Verses 190-191)

9
The Qur'ān: A Definitive Description

Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. (192)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَتَنزِيلُ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٩٢

The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down (193)

نَزَلَ بِهِ ٱلرُّوحُ ٱلۡأَمِينُ ١٩٣

into your heart – so that you may give warning, (194)

عَلَىٰ قَلۡبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُنذِرِينَ ١٩٤

in the clear Arabic tongue. (195)

بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيّٖ مُّبِينٖ ١٩٥

It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. (196)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَفِي زُبُرِ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ١٩٦

Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]? (197)

أَوَلَمۡ يَكُن لَّهُمۡ ءَايَةً أَن يَعۡلَمَهُۥ عُلَمَٰٓؤُاْ بَنِيٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ ١٩٧

Had We revealed it to any non- Arab, (198)

وَلَوۡ نَزَّلۡنَٰهُ عَلَىٰ بَعۡضِ ٱلۡأَعۡجَمِينَ ١٩٨

and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it. (199)

فَقَرَأَهُۥ عَلَيۡهِم مَّا كَانُواْ بِهِۦ مُؤۡمِنِينَ ١٩٩

Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: (200)

كَذَٰلِكَ سَلَكۡنَٰهُ فِي قُلُوبِ ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ ٢٠٠

they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. (201)

لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِۦ حَتَّىٰ يَرَوُاْ ٱلْعَذَابَ
ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٢٠١﴾

It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it. (202)

فَيَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢٠٢﴾

And then they will say: 'Could we have a respite?' (203)

فَيَقُولُواْ هَلْ نَحْنُ مُنظَرُونَ ﴿٢٠٣﴾

Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? (204)

أَفَبِعَذَابِنَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٢٠٤﴾

But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, (205)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ إِن مَّتَّعْنَٰهُمْ سِنِينَ ﴿٢٠٥﴾

and then the promised [punishment] befalls them – (206)

ثُمَّ جَآءَهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment? (207)

مَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يُمَتَّعُونَ ﴿٢٠٧﴾

Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, (208)

وَمَآ أَهْلَكْنَا مِن قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا لَهَا مُنذِرُونَ ﴿٢٠٨﴾

and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone. (209)

ذِكْرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا ظَٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٠٩﴾

No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān] (210)

وَمَا تَنَزَّلَتْ بِهِ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ ﴿٢١٠﴾

It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. (211)

وَمَا يَنۢبَغِي لَهُمْ وَمَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ ﴿٢١١﴾

Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it. (212)

إِنَّهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّمْعِ لَمَعْزُولُونَ ﴿٢١٢﴾

Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself

فَلَا تَدْعُ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَتَكُونَ
مِنَ ٱلْمُعَذَّبِينَ ﴿٢١٣﴾

among those suffering punishment. (213)

And warn your nearest kindred, (214)

وَأَنذِرْ عَشِيرَتَكَ ٱلْأَقْرَبِينَ ﴿٢١٤﴾

and spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you. (215)

وَٱخْفِضْ جَنَاحَكَ لِمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢١٥﴾

But if they disobey you, say: 'I am not accountable for what you do.' (216)

فَإِنْ عَصَوْكَ فَقُلْ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢١٦﴾

Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate (217)

وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿٢١٧﴾

who sees you when you stand, (218)

ٱلَّذِى يَرَىٰكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٢١٨﴾

and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. (219)

وَتَقَلُّبَكَ فِى ٱلسَّٰجِدِينَ ﴿٢١٩﴾

It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (220)

إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٢٢٠﴾

Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the satans descend? (221)

هَلْ أُنَبِّئُكُمْ عَلَىٰ مَن تَنَزَّلُ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينُ ﴿٢٢١﴾

They descend upon every lying sinner. (222)

تَنَزَّلُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ أَفَّاكٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿٢٢٢﴾

They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars. (223)

يُلْقُونَ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمْ كَٰذِبُونَ ﴿٢٢٣﴾

As for the poets, only those who are lost in error follow them. (224)

وَٱلشُّعَرَآءُ يَتَّبِعُهُمُ ٱلْغَاوُۥنَ ﴿٢٢٤﴾

Are you not aware that they roam confusedly through all valleys, (225)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّهُمْ فِى كُلِّ وَادٍ يَهِيمُونَ ﴿٢٢٥﴾

and that they say what they do not do?

وَأَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ مَا لَا يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٢٦﴾

(226)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّـٰلِحَـٰتِ
وَذَكَرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَٱنتَصَرُوا۟ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا
ظُلِمُوا۟ ۗ وَسَيَعْلَمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓا۟ أَىَّ
مُنقَلَبٍ يَنقَلِبُونَ ﴿٢٢٧﴾

Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged. Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take. (227)

Overview

Thus the stories telling us about God's messengers and the messages they were required to deliver, the denial of the truth by different communities, the challenges they made and the punishments meted out to them come to an end. They had begun after a short introduction at the beginning of the *sūrah* directly addressing the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his people, the Quraysh: *"Would you, perhaps, torment yourself to death [with grief] because they would not believe? If We will, We can send down to them from the skies a sign before which their necks will remain bent in submission. Yet whenever any fresh reminder comes to them from the Most Merciful, they always turn their backs on it. They have indeed denied [the truth of revelation]; and they will in time come to understand what it was they were wont to deride."* (Verses 3-6) Then the *sūrah* embarked on telling those stories, each of which gives an example of a community coming to understand the reality of what they used to deride and ridicule.

When the *sūrah* has concluded the stories, it picks up its main theme outlined in the introduction. Hence, its final comments talk about the Qur'ān, confirming its revelation by God, the Lord of all the worlds. While time has wiped away the history of those ancient communities, the Qur'ān, which was revealed by God, brings it all back, telling it in accurate detail. It also mentions that the learned ones among the Children of Israel were well aware of the Qur'ān and the Messenger to whom it was revealed because he is mentioned in earlier revelations. But the Arab idolaters stubbornly rejected it, despite the clear evidence of its truth, alleging that it is nothing but sorcery or poetry. Had a non-Arabic speaking person been its recipient and had he recited it to them in their own language, they still would not have believed in it. It was not the lack of clear evidence that caused them to deny it; rather, it was their stubborn refusal to see it for what it was. Indeed, it was not something given to the Prophet Muhammad by devils, as was information given to fortune tellers. Nor was it anything akin to poetry. Rather, the Qur'ān followed a clear line which it pursued

without deviation, while poets move in every direction in accordance with their feelings, caprices and reactions.

The Qur'ān was and is a reminder to all unbelievers, given by God who warned them that they must believe if they were to avert punishment. Unless they changed their ways, they would be made to see the reality which they now deride: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227)

Facts of Revelation

> *Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue.* (Verses 192-195)

The trustworthy Spirit was the angel Gabriel, or Jibrīl, who brought the Qur'ān from God and imprinted it in the Prophet's heart. He was certainly trustworthy, keeping intact what was given into his trust. Thus, he gave it directly to the Prophet Muhammad, who understood it fully. Thus, the Prophet became a warner giving people admonition in the clear Arabic tongue, which was the language his people spoke. As they were well aware of the utmost that human beings could say, they recognized as the Prophet recited the Qur'ān to them that it was unlike what humans say despite its being in their own tongue. By its very construction, meanings, method and consistency, it clearly demonstrated that it definitely came from no human source.

This evidence came from within the Qur'ān itself. The *sūrah,* however, also provides further evidence, but this time it is external: *"It was surely foretold in the revealed books of former peoples. Is it not sufficient proof for them that the learned ones among the Children of Israel have recognized it [as true]?"* (Verses 196-197) The description of the Messenger who would receive the Qur'ān from on high, and the fundamentals of the faith he would preach were clearly indicated in the scriptures of ancient peoples. Hence, the learned ones among the Children of Israel were expecting this last message and Messenger. They felt that the time for his appearance was fast approaching and they talked about it among themselves, as reported by Salmān and `Abdullāh ibn Sallām.[2] Reports concerning this are absolutely authentic.

[2] Salmān was the son of a Persian priest who was preparing his son to follow in his footsteps, but he left in search of the truth and met several Christian priests who told him of the Prophet Muhammad's imminent advent. He, therefore, went to Madinah to await his message. `Abdullāh ibn Sallām was a learned rabbi who made sure of the Prophet's identity according to detailed descriptions given in Jewish scriptures. Both, father and son, became Muslims and told of their prior knowledge of the

Those idolaters were knowingly stubborn in their opposition. They did not lack the evidence or the proof. Had a non-Arab come to them and recited the Qur'ān in its superb Arabic style, they would still have refused to believe: *"Had We revealed it to any non-Arab, and had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it."* (Verses 198-199) This was meant to comfort the Prophet, presenting to him their stubborn refusal despite the clearest form of evidence. The *sūrah* then states that such denial of the truth, despite its clarity and certainty, was second nature to them. They would not depart from this stance until they suffered God's punishment, which would take them by surprise: *"Thus have We caused it to pass through the hearts of the guilty: they shall not believe in it until they see the grievous suffering. It will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* (Verses 200-202)

Thus the *sūrah* provides a physical image of their unbudging denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān, saying that it has been made to pass through their constitution in denial form. Thus it does not reach their minds and hearts except in the form of something that is denied and rejected. It remains so in their hearts *"until they see the grievous suffering."* But such suffering *"will come to them suddenly, without their being aware of it."* Indeed, some maintained such a stubborn denial until they departed from the face of the earth. This, then, heralded their grievous suffering. For it is at the very moment of facing such suffering that realization is achieved: *"And then they will say: Could we have a respite?"* (Verse 203) Can we have another chance to rectify what has passed? That, however, will never be given.

They hastened God's punishment with their careless ridicule, believing that the comforts they enjoyed would last. Hence, they considered it improbable that they could ever move from a position of favour to one of suffering and punishment. This is a common attitude among those who enjoy a life of comfort and blessing. They rarely, if ever, think that it can all be removed. Hence, the *sūrah* wakens them to this reality, raising before them what their position will be when they suffer the punishment they now hasten: *"Do they, then, wish that Our punishment be hurried on? But consider this: If We allow them to enjoy themselves for several years, and then the promised [punishment] befalls them — of what avail to them will be all their past enjoyment?"* (Verses 204-207) The *sūrah* puts the image of hastening punishment to one side, and raises the prospect of the fulfilment of the warnings. We see the years of pleasure dwindling, as though they had never been. They benefit them in no way.

An authentic *ĥadīth,* according to Ibn Kathīr, quotes the Prophet as saying: "An unbeliever is brought forward on the Day of Judgement and he is given a quick dip into the fire. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience anything good or any luxury in your life?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did.' And the person who endured the most miserable life on earth is brought forward and he is

Prophet and his message. — Editor's note.

given a quick taste of heaven. He is then asked: 'Did you ever experience any misfortune or misery?' He will answer: 'By Your greatness, my Lord, I never did."'[3]

The unbelievers are then put on notice that the warning is a prelude to destruction. It is after all an aspect of God's grace that He does not destroy a community without first sending them a messenger pointing to the signs that should encourage them to accept the faith: *"Never have We destroyed any community unless it had received warnings, and reminders. Never do We wrong anyone."* (Verses 208-209)

God took a pledge from all mankind that they would worship Him alone. This is the pledge of nature which makes human nature feel the presence of the One God, unless it grows corrupt and deviates.[4] He placed countless indications in the world around us pointing to the right faith. All these confirm the presence of the One Creator. When people forget the pledge of their own nature, and overlook the pointers to faith, God sends them a warner to remind them of what they have forgotten and puts before their eyes what they have overlooked. Thus, the divine message is meant as a reminder and an act of perfect justice and total mercy: *"Never do We wrong anyone."* (Verse 209) This is true even with the destruction of unbelieving communities. Such destruction is fair requital for deviating from proper guidance.

The *sūrah* has more to say about the Qur'ān making the method of its revelation very clear: *"No evil spirits have brought down [this Qur'ān]. It is not for them [to do so], nor can they. Indeed they are debarred even from hearing it."* (Verses 210-212)

The *sūrah* had already given a clear statement of the source of the Qur'ān: *"Most certainly, this [Qur'ān] has been bestowed from on high by the Lord of all the worlds. The trustworthy Spirit has brought it down into your heart – so that you may give warning, in the clear Arabic tongue."* (Verses 192-195) The *sūrah* then goes on to speak about the unbelievers' denial of the revelation of the Qur'ān from on high and their hastening of their punishment by way of challenging the Prophet. Now the *sūrah* refutes their claims that it is no more than the talk of evil spirits, of the sort fortune-tellers display, claiming that some spirits bring them news of the world beyond as they listen to the angels.

This Qur'ān, which calls people to lead a virtuous life and to have faith, providing them with guidance, could not be given by evil spirits which lead people astray and advocate corruption and disbelief. They cannot initiate it even if they try, because they have been debarred from listening to it as it is revealed by God. The one who brings it down to the Prophet, by God's permission, is the trustworthy Spirit. Hence,

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[3] Ibn Kathīr mentions this *ĥadīth* preceded by the statement: An authentic *ĥadīth* says...'

[4] See the comments on verse 172, *Sūrah* 7, which speaks in detail about the pledge of human nature, Vol. VI, pp. 218-224.

the evil ones cannot even touch it.

How to Give Warning

At this juncture, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, warning him against associating partners with God, even though he was always far from so doing. Yet the warning is given to him so that he could be more careful. The Prophet is assigned the task of warning his closest kinsmen, and ordered to place his trust in God who takes care of him in all situations:

> *Hence, do not invoke any other deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself among those suffering punishment. And warn your nearest kindred, and spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you. But if they disobey you, say: 'I' am not accountable for what you do.' Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.* (Verses 213-220)

It is impossible that God's Messenger should ever invoke anyone other than God, but this situation is assumed here to clarify the point. Therefore, when the Prophet is threatened with punishment should he do so, what chance has anyone else? How could anyone be spared such grievous punishment when there is no special treatment granted to anyone?

Having been given this personal warning, the Prophet is instructed to warn his own relatives so that they may become an example for others. The Prophet's relatives are indeed warned that they will endure grievous suffering should they persist in associating partners with God: *"And warn your nearest kindred."*

Both al-Bukhārī and Muslim relate that when this verse was revealed, the Prophet went up the hill of al-Ṣafā [which is close to the Sacred Mosque] and called out to his people to gather for he wanted to tell them something important. "People responded to his call, with some coming themselves and others sending someone to find out what was afoot. The Prophet said to them: 'You clans of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Fihr and Lu'ayy! Should I tell you that a host of armed riders are close by the mountain aiming to launch a raid on you, would you believe me?' They answered in the affirmative. He said: 'I am sent to you as a warner of impending grievous suffering.' Abū Lahab said to him: 'Confound you all day long! Have you called us only to tell us this?' God then revealed the *sūrah* that says: *'Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he.'"* (111: 1)

Muslim relates on `Ā'ishah's authority: "When the verse that says, 'Warn your

nearest kindred,' was revealed, the Prophet stood up and called his relatives, saying: 'Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! [i.e. his own daughter], Ṣafiyyah bint `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his aunt], you the clan of `Abd al-Muṭṭalib! [i.e. his own clan], I can benefit you nothing against God. You can ask me whatever you wish from my own money.

Muslim and al-Tirmidhī relate on Abū Hurayrah's authority that "when this verse was revealed the Prophet called the Quraysh, speaking to them in general and to some by name. He said: 'You people of the Quraysh! Save yourselves from the fire. You people of the Ka (b! Save yourselves from the fire. Fāṭimah bint Muhammad! Save yourself from the fire. By God, I can avail you nothing against God. But you are my kinsfolk and I will be all kindness to you."

These *aĥādīth* and many others show how the Prophet received this order and how he carried it out, giving warning to his kinsfolk, making it clear that he had no power to benefit them. He left them to God to determine their fate in the hereafter. He put them on notice that their relation to him would be of no benefit unless their own actions benefitted them. Such is the clear approach of Islam which allows no intermediation between God and His servants, not even by His last Messenger.

How to Treat Believers

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet how to treat the believers who respond to God's message as a result of his efforts: *"And spread the wing of your tenderness over all of the believers who follow you."* (Verse 215) Thus the Prophet is instructed to treat the believers gently, and to show his humility and kindness. This instruction is given in a physical, tangible image like a bird lowering its wings in flight but seeking to descend. The Prophet adopted this attitude with believers throughout his life. Indeed, his manners were a practical translation of the Qur'ān.

The *sūrah* also tells him how he should treat those who are disobedient, dissociating himself completely from them: *"But if they disobey you, say: I am not accountable for what you do."* (Verse 216) This order was given in Makkah, before the Prophet was given permission to fight unbelievers.

The *sūrah* then tells the Prophet to turn to his Lord with whom he has a permanent relationship of care: *"Place your trust in the Almighty, the Compassionate who sees you when you stand, and [sees] your movement among those who prostrate themselves [before Him]. It is He alone who hears all and knows all."* (Verses 217-220) Leave them to their disobedience of God's orders, dissociate yourself from their actions and turn to your Lord with full trust, seeking His help in all your affairs. The *sūrah* mentions the two divine attributes frequently mentioned earlier: might and compassion. The Prophet is made to feel his closeness to God as his Lord sees him when he stands up for prayer on his own, and also sees him when he prays with a congregation as they prostrate

themselves to God. He sees him in his solitude and when he is attending to the congregation, organizing them and leading them in prayer. He sees all his movements and is fully aware of his thoughts, listening to his supplications: *"It is He alone who hears all and knows all."* (Verse 220) This sort of address comforted the Prophet, reassured him that God was watching over and looking after him.

Once more in this final passage of the *sūrah,* the Qur'ān is brought into focus. The first comment emphasized that it was a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds, brought to Muhammad through the trusted Spirit, Gabriel. Secondly, it made clear that no evil spirit could deliver it. Now the *sūrah* asserts that such evil ones do not come to a person like Muhammad (peace be upon him), who is honest, truthful and advocates a sound system. They go only to a liar, such as a wicked fortune-teller. Such people receive whatever evil spirits give them and circulate their disinformation widely after they themselves have further exaggerated it: *"Shall I tell you upon whom it is that the satans descend? They descend upon every lying sinner. They eagerly listen, but most of them are liars."* (Verses 221-223)

There were among the Arabs some fortune-tellers who claimed that the *jinn* brought them news and information. People used to go to these fortune-tellers seeking advice, and trusting their prophecies, but most were liars. To believe them was to pursue myth and wishful thinking. No such fortune-teller advocated any proper code of living, or urged people to fear God, or counselled them to believe. When the Prophet called on people to accept his message, he actually advocated a complete code of virtuous living.

At times, the Arab unbelievers described the Qur'ān as poetry, claiming that the Prophet was a poet. This was due to their utter helplessness in facing up to the Qur'ān; its powerful discourse was incomparable to anything they knew. They realized that it touched people's hearts, affected their feelings and overcame their resistance. Yet they could not stop it.

In this *sūrah,* the Qur'ān itself explains to them that the way of life Muhammad advocated and the Qur'ān outlined was totally and fundamentally different from that of poets and poetry. This Qur'ān sets a clear method and aims towards a definite objective. The Prophet did not say something one day which he contradicted the next. Nor did he pursue fleeting desires and momentary feelings. Instead, he pursued the establishment of his faith, following a straight system that admits no crookedness. Poets are totally unlike this. They are often hostage to their reactions and momentary feelings, which press for expression as they occur. They describe something as black today and white tomorrow. When they are happy, they say one thing, which they contradict when they are angry. Their moods are never consistent. Besides, they create their own imaginary world. They conjure up actions and results, then imagine these to be hard facts which influence their behaviour. Hence, their

concern for realities is diminished because they create a different, imaginery world in which they live.

Reality versus Imagination

A person with a well-defined message who wants to see it implemented in people's lives has a totally different perspective. He has an objective, method of action and a line to follow. He goes along his line, pursuing his method to achieve his end, keeping his heart and mind open and alert. He will not accept myth, or be satisfied with visions and dreams. He is only satisfied when his message becomes a practised reality in human life.

Thus the methods of God's Messenger and poets are poles apart. The two can never be confused: *"As for the poets, only those who are lost in error follow them. Are you not aware that they roam confusedly through all valleys, and that they say what they do not do?"* (Verses 224-226) Poets follow their own moods, whims and desires, which means that they are followed only by those who similarly roam about confusedly with whims and passions, having no defined objective or clear line. Moreover, poets pursue every feeling, idea or statement according to that which takes hold of them at any particular moment.

Furthermore, poets say what they do not do, because they live in a world made of their own imagination and sentiment. They prefer such an imaginary world to real life which does not particularly impress them. Hence, they exaggerate and claim things that they themselves do not fulfil. Thus, what they say has no reality in practical human life.

Since Islam is a complete life system, devised for implementation in real life, and since it has a strong bearing on people's consciences and on all aspects of life, it is by nature incompatible with the overwhelming majority of poets. A poet creates a dream in his own world and feels content with it. Islam, on the other hand, wants the dream to become a reality and works for its implementation. It transforms all feelings so that they work together to produce in the real world a perfect model of humanity.

Islam wants people to face up to the facts of life, and not to escape to an imaginary dream. If the facts of life are unsatisfactory or inconsistent with the way of life Islam wants people to implement, it urges them to change these aspects so that they can pursue its way of life. Thus, human energy is used for the fulfilment of noble objectives according to Islam's magnificent way of life.

Nevertheless, Islam does not suppress poetry and art altogether, as some people may take the statement to mean. It simply disapproves of the line followed by poetry and art, giving full rein to uncontrolled whims and reactions, as well as fanciful

dreams that absorb the energy of the dreamers so that they cannot fulfil them. When the human soul adopts the Islamic system, and interacts with Islamic values, it produces poetry and art while working at the same time to see its noble feelings realized in practice.

It is perfectly possible for the human soul to achieve an Islamic objective, looking at life from an Islamic viewpoint, and at the same time express all this in poetry and art. In such a situation, Islam approves of poetry and art, indeed encourages poets and artists.

What Makes Poetry Islamic

The Qur'ān directs people's minds and hearts to the great wonders in the universe and within the human soul, both of which are the material of poetry and art. Indeed, the Qur'ān includes passages on the wonders of creation that can never be matched by any poetry in respect of penetration, fascination and presentation.

Therefore, the Qur'ān makes an exception of the above general description of poets: *"Excepted are those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember God often, and strive to be triumphant after they have been wronged."* (Verse 227) These are not included in the general description, because they have believed and their hearts are, as a result, full of a faith while their lives follow a clear system. They do righteous deeds and their energy is directed towards what is good, beneficial and beautiful. They are not satisfied with dreams and visions. They work hard, putting all their energies into their striving, so that they can support the truth in which they believe, and achieve the victory to which they aspire.

Among the poets who fought with their poetry defending the Islamic faith and its Messenger, at the height of the battle against idolatry and idolaters during the Prophet's lifetime were Ĥassān ibn Thābit, Ka`b ibn Mālik and `Abdullāh ibn Rawāĥah, all of whom were from among the *Anşār.* Also among them were `Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba`rā and Abū Sufyān ibn al-Ĥārith ibn `Abd al-Muţţalib, both of whom used to abuse the Prophet in their poetry in their pre-Islamic days. When they adopted Islam, they did well and composed fine poetry in praise of the Prophet and in support of Islam.

It is authentically reported that the Prophet said to Ĥassān: "Attack them and Gabriel [the angel] will support you." `Abd al-Raĥmān ibn Kai) reports that his father, Ka`b ibn Mālik, said to God's Messenger: "God has revealed what you know about poets." The Prophet said to him: "A believer defends Islam with his sword as also with his tongue. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, your words that you throw at them are just like arrows." [Related by Aĥmad.]

This type of Islamic poetry was what was needed at the time. There are other modes, however, by which poetry and art become Islamic. It is sufficient that poetry or art in general issues from an Islamic concept of life, in any field, to gain Islamic acceptance. Poetry can be perfectly Islamic without having to attack the opponents of Islam, defend Islam, glorify its values or history, or contribute directly to its advocacy. A glance at the passage of night, feeling the first breath of dawn, coupled with an expression of a Muslim's sense that relates such phenomena to the Creator, is of the very essence of Islamic poetry. A moment of inner enlightenment, feeling God's presence or action, or relating what one sees in the world around one to its Creator, is bound to produce poetry that is perfectly acceptable to Islam.

The point that distinguishes what Islam rejects from what it approves is that Islam has its own concept of life as a whole, its relations and bonds. Whatever poetry issues from such a concept is fine and acceptable from the Islamic point of view.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a general implicit warning: *"Those who are bent on wrongdoing will in time know what an evil turn their destiny will surely take."* (Verse 227) The *sūrah* has spoken about the unbelievers and their stubborn rejection of Islam, their heedless approach to warnings, the hastening of their punishment, as well as scenes of the destruction of past communities of unbelievers. It now concludes with this strong warning that sums up its theme. The warning serves as a final strong note, one which is felt to violently shake the very foundations of wrongdoing and wrongdoers.

SŪRAH 27

Al-Naml

(The Ants)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah shortly after *Sūrah* 26, The Poets, and it follows the same pattern: an introduction and conclusion which together spell out the subject matter. In between there are several historical accounts that emphasize the main theme, providing further elucidation of it. Theses histories help to draw parallels between the attitudes of the unbelievers in Makkah on the one hand and their predecessors among other communities on the other. Thus, the *sūrah* reveals a pattern which advocates of Islam in any generation need to contemplate.

As in all Makkan *sūrahs,* the main theme is faith: to believe in God and worship Him alone, without partners, and to believe in the resurrection as well as reward and punishment in the hereafter. This also requires believing in God's revelations, and that all matters that are beyond our perception, or *ghayb,* belong to God: they are known only to Him. A further prerequisite of such faith is belief in God's attributes: He alone is the Creator and Provider, and all blessings come from Him alone. Hence, gratitude is due to Him for all that He gives us. Moreover, He is the Almighty who grants us all our faculties, abilities and powers.

The *sūrah's* historical accounts confirm these issues and portray the fate of those who deny them and the happy end of those who believe in them. Immediately after the opening, we have a short account of Moses which describes his sighting of a fire as he travelled at night in the desert, his approach towards it and how he was addressed from on high. This account also documents the message Moses was required to deliver to Pharaoh. The *sūrah* then immediately proceeds to state that

Pharaoh and his people denied the truth of the signs God sent them, even though they knew in their hearts that these were true. In this context we are also told of the fate of those who knowingly deny the truth: *"Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers."* (Verse 14) The Makkan unbelievers' attitude towards the Qur'ān, which they knew to be truly God's revelation was, in essence, no different than these earlier evildoers.

We then have a reference to the blessings God bestowed on David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). This precedes Solomon's story with the ant, the hoopoe and the Queen of Sheba. The story highlights that David and Solomon were truly thankful for the favours God granted them, which included knowledge, a kingdom and prophethood. In addition, He made the *jinn* and the birds subservient to Solomon, willing to do his bidding. Again the story here highlights the basics of faith preached by all God's messengers. The account gives special treatment to how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon's message, contrasting this with the reception the Quraysh gave God's message as preached by the Prophet Muhammad. Basically, the Quraysh denied the message, describing it as false, while the others accepted it. Yet it was God who gave Solomon all the knowledge, wealth and power he possessed. It is God who knows and owns everything. When compared with those of God, Solomon's kingdom and knowledge were no more than a drop in the ocean.

Then follows an account of the Prophet Şāliĥ and the Thamūd. Of particular importance here is the conspiracy some of the evildoers among his people concocted against Şāliĥ and his household, plotting to kill him. It shows how God foiled their plot, saved Şāliĥ and the believers, and destroyed the Thamūd together with the conspirators: "*Their dwellings are now empty.*" (Verse 52) The Quraysh also plotted against the Prophet Muhammad, similarly conspiring to kill him at night.

The last historical account in this *sūrah* concerns Lot. It tells how his people planned to drive him and those who believed in him out of their town under the pretext that they *kept themselves pure'*. It tells us of their end after Lot and his group left them to their fate: *"We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned."* (Verse 58) The Quraysh also considered driving the Prophet out of their city, shortly before he migrated to Madinah.

Once these historical aspects are dealt with, the *sūrah* begins its comments with the verse: *"Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?"* (Verse 59) It then takes us on a descriptive round of some great universal scenes, as also some of the deeper aspects of the human soul. In this way, the *sūrah* shows us the work of the great Maker, Planner, Creator and Sustainer who alone knows what lies beyond the reach

of any created being's perception, and to whom we shall all return. It then tells us about one of the aspects that signal the coming of the Last Hour, adding some images of the Day of Judgement and the fate that awaits those who deny it.

The *sūrah* concludes on a note that fits well with its subject matter and ambience: *"I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God], and to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner. And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."* (Verses 91-93)

Throughout the *sūrah,* special emphasis is laid on knowledge, highlighting God's perfect knowledge of what is concealed and what is left public, particularly His knowledge of everything that lies beyond the reach of our perceptions. It also speaks about some of the universal signs which He reveals to us. It refers to the knowledge God granted David and Solomon, and how Solomon was taught the language of the birds, and how he humbly acknowledged such learning. Hence, at the beginning of the *sūrah* the Prophet is told: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) In the comments on the historical accounts the Prophet is instructed to say: *"None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead. Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verses 65-66) *"Indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verses 74-75) In conclusion we are told: *"He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) The story of Solomon begins as follows: *"For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants."* (Verse 15) Knowledge is given special emphasis in such verses, not least where Solomon says: *"We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) And also as the Hoopoe says: *"That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) When Solomon wanted the queen's throne to be brought to him, it was not the skilful *jinn* who brought it in the wink of an eye; the one who did was a person *"who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

Thus knowledge is the main feature that permeates the entire *sūrah,* from beginning to end, so as to highlight its special importance.

1
Revelations Bringing Happy News

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Ṭā Sīn. These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book; (1)

طسٓۚ تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ وَكِتَابٖ
مُّبِينٍ ١

a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers (2)

هُدٗى وَبُشۡرَىٰ لِلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٢

who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come. (3)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ
وَهُم بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ يُوقِنُونَ ٣

As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction. (4)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ زَيَّنَّا لَهُمۡ
أَعۡمَٰلَهُمۡ فَهُمۡ يَعۡمَهُونَ ٤

These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers. (5)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَهُمۡ سُوٓءُ ٱلۡعَذَابِ وَهُمۡ فِي
ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمُ ٱلۡأَخۡسَرُونَ ٥

Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing. (6)

وَإِنَّكَ لَتُلَقَّى ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ مِن لَّدُنۡ حَكِيمٍ
عَلِيمٍ ٦

All by the Grace of God

The *sūrah* begins with two separate letters, *Ṭā Sīn,* as reference to the basic material of which the *sūrah* and the entire Qur'ān are composed. These letters are available to all Arabic-speaking people, yet they are all unable to compose anything like the Qur'ān: they have been challenged to do so, yet none has ever produced anything that approximates the excellence of the Qur'ān. These two letters are followed by a reference to the Qur'ān itself: *"These are verses of the Qur'ān, a clear, elucidating book."* (Verse 1) It should be noted that in the Arabic text the conjunction *wa,* which means 'and', occurs after the word 'Qur'ān', but in this usage it only means 'which is'. Describing the Qur'ān here as 'a book' provides a subtle element of comparison with how the unbelievers in Makkah received the book bestowed on them from on high and how the Queen of Sheba and her people received Solomon's letter, which in this *sūrah* is also called a *kitāb,* meaning 'book'. Yet Solomon is no more than God's servant.

The Qur'ān, or the book, is then described as *"a guidance and joyful tidings to the believers."* (Verse 2) This is more expressive than saying that it contains or provides guidance and joyful tidings. Indeed the way the description is phrased makes the very entity of the Qur'ān the guidance and the happy tiding. For certain, the Qur'ān provides guidance to believers in every way and every sense. It also gives them what brings happiness both in this life and in the life to come.

That the guidance and the happy news are given to the believers only is especially significant. The Qur'ān is not a book of theoretical or applicable science that yields all its benefits to whoever reads and understands it. The Qur'ān addresses hearts in the first instance and gives all its light and fragrance to an open mind which receives it with certainty and contentment. When a person's mind is refreshed with firm belief, it can better appreciate the Qur'ān and understand far more of its meanings than we can imagine. It brings about miraculous changes in this life as one adopts a new way of life and discards his old one. All the systems, legislation and values the Qur'ān promotes are based first and foremost on faith. Hence, a person who does not, deep at heart, believe in God or accept that this Qur'ān is revealed by God or that its contents represent the system God wants implemented in human life, cannot find the desired guidance in the Qur'ān and will not share in the joyful news it brings.

This book, the Qur'ān, contains inexhaustible treasures of guidance, knowledge and sound directives, but faith is the key to opening it all. Without this key, the Qur'ān does not yield its treasures to anyone. Hence those who truly believed in it were able to accomplish miracles. But when the Qur'ān was reduced to no more than chants set to charming tunes that people enjoyed hearing without touching their hearts, it remained an unopened treasure, incapable of achieving anything.

The *sūrah* outlines the qualities of those believers who find guidance and happy news in the Qur'ān. They are ones: *"who attend regularly to prayers and pay their zakāt, and who firmly believe in the life to come."* (Verse 3) The first quality is to attend regularly to prayer, offering it as it should be offered, with their hearts and souls conscious of the fact that they are standing in front of God, in all His majesty. Thus they feel themselves in contact with His sublime presence, and their thoughts fully attentive to addressing and glorifying Him. Secondly, they pay their *zakāt,* which is the obligatory charity. When they pay it they purge their hearts of stinginess rising above the lure of wealth. They give their brethren some of what God has granted them, thus fulfilling their social duty towards their community. Finally, they firmly believe in the life to come, which means that their fate in the hereafter remains topmost in their thoughts. It prevents them from giving free rein to their desires and keeps the fear of God alive in their hearts. They dread lest they might be considered disobedient when they come before Him for judgement.

It is only such obedient believers who can hope for God's reward yet still dread His punishment. Only they, with their hearts open to the Qur'ān, can find its guidance and receive its happy news. For them, it is a light illuminating their lives, providing them with strong motivation for action. It is their only reliable guide and one to which they always refer.

Strong emphasis is placed on believing in the hereafter; this in the form of a stern warning to those who refuse to believe, and persist with their erring ways: *"As for those who will not believe in the life to come, We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction."* (Verse 4)

Believing in the life to come is the motive that keeps whims and desires in check, urging us to lead a life of moderation. When such belief is lacking, a person cannot restrain himself from pursuing wanton desires, thinking that his only chance for indulging in pleasure is that offered in this life. Yet life on earth is scarcely long enough to fulfil a small portion of what people desire or hope for. Besides, when someone has the means to lead a life of indulgence, what can stop him from pursuing his wildest pleasures unless he has to reckon with standing before God, awaiting His judgement, reward or punishment? Indeed, a person lacking belief in the hereafter will inevitably pursue every pleasure within his ability. No sense of shame or check will restrain him. It is in the nature of human beings that they love pleasure unless they are guided by a divine message that tells them of a future, permanent life that follows this short one, and that the latter is but preparation for that future life. If they heed this guidance then they will find much greater pleasure in different types of pursuits.

It is God who has moulded human nature in this fashion, giving it the propensity to follow His guidance when it opens its receptive faculties to this, and the opposite

propensity to remain blind when it shuts such faculties down. His will is always done, in both situations. Hence, the Qur'ān says in reference to those who will not believe in the hereafter: *"We make their deeds seem fair to them, and so they wander about in distraction."* (Verse 4) They choose not to believe, and thus God's law comes into operation making their deeds seem fair and attractive to them. They cannot see any foul element in what they do and so remain unable to find a clear way leading them aright.

When evil is made to seem fair, the end result is well known: *"These are the ones for whom grievous suffering is in store, and who in the life to come shall be the worst losers."* (Verse 5) Whether suffering is meted out to them in this present life or in the life to come, they will have to face utter ruin in the hereafter. It will be their just recompense for pursuing what is evil.

The *sūrah's* opening is completed with a verse that re-emphasizes the divine source of the Qur'ān: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) The Arabic verb *tulaqqā,* which is rendered here as *'you receive',* gives a sense of the Qur'ān being a sublime gift presented by the One who does everything wisely and plans everything on the basis of perfect knowledge. Indeed, His wisdom and knowledge are clearly seen in the Qur'ān; its mode, the duties it assigns and directives it gives, in the system it follows, in its revelation at the most appropriate time, in the flow of its component parts and in the harmony of its subject matter.

The *sūrah* then begins its historical accounts which provide a panoramic exhibition of aspects of God's wisdom, knowledge, planning and care.

2
Nine Miracles for Most

Moses said to his family: ‘I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves.’ (7)

إِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَهْلِهِۦٓ إِنِّىٓ ءَانَسْتُ نَارًا سَـَٔاتِيكُم مِّنْهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوْ ءَاتِيكُم بِشِهَابٍ قَبَسٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

But when he came close to it, he was addressed: ‘Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds.’ (8)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهَا نُودِىَ أَنۢ بُورِكَ مَن فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَسُبْحَـٰنَ ٱللَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨﴾

‘Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise! (9)

يَـٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّهُۥٓ أَنَا ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

Now throw down your staff’ But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. ‘Moses, have no fear!’ [Said God]: ‘Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence. (10)

وَأَلْقِ عَصَاكَ ۚ فَلَمَّا رَءَاهَا تَهْتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا جَآنٌّ وَلَّىٰ مُدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ ۚ يَـٰمُوسَىٰ لَا تَخَفْ إِنِّى لَا يَخَافُ لَدَىَّ ٱلْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (11)

إِلَّا مَن ظَلَمَ ثُمَّ بَدَّلَ حُسْنًۢا بَعْدَ سُوٓءٍ فَإِنِّى غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. [This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people.’ (12)

وَأَدْخِلْ يَدَكَ فِى جَيْبِكَ تَخْرُجْ بَيْضَآءَ مِنْ غَيْرِ سُوٓءٍ ۖ فِى تِسْعِ ءَايَـٰتٍ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَوْمًا فَـٰسِقِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' (13)	فَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡهُمۡ ءَايَٰتُنَا مُبۡصِرَةٗ قَالُواْ هَٰذَا سِحۡرٞ مُّبِينٞ ﴿١٣﴾
Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers. (14)	وَجَحَدُواْ بِهَا وَٱسۡتَيۡقَنَتۡهَآ أَنفُسُهُمۡ ظُلۡمٗا وَعُلُوّٗاۚ فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Overview

This short and quick episode about Moses occurs immediately after God has assured the Prophet of his divine revelations: *"Most certainly, you receive the Qur'ān out of the grace of One who is Wise, All-Knowing."* (Verse 6) It is as though the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was being told that receiving such revelations was not a new phenomenon without precedent in history. Here, we see Moses being assigned his mission. He was called from on high to deliver the message to Pharaoh and his people. Similarly, the Prophet was told that the opposition he met with and the accusations levelled at him by his people were nothing new. Moses' people were certain at heart that the signs they were shown were the work of none other than God but, in their wicked arrogance, they nevertheless denied them. The end those evildoers of old met should be reflected upon, for his own people who were also stubborn in their rejection of the truth of the divine message could face a similar end.

Moses: A Favoured Messenger

"Moses said to his family: I perceive a fire. I will bring you from there some information, or else, I will bring you a burning brand so that you may warm yourselves." (Verse 7) This event, which is mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, took place when Moses was on his way back from Madyan to Egypt, accompanied by his wife, the daughter of Shu`ayb (peace be upon him).[5] He apparently lost his way on a dark cold night. This is suggested by him saying to his wife that he would bring information or a torch to give them some warmth. This occurred close to Mount Sinai, called al-Ṭūr in Arabic.

[5] We do not have any authentic statement confirming that the old man who employed Moses and had two daughters one of whom was married to Moses was in fact Shu`ayb. This is, however, a high probability, one given greater weight by the fact that whenever the Qur'ān mentions the two prophets, Moses' story follows that of Shu'ayb's which suggests that they occurred at the same time, or in quick succession.

Desert dwellers used to light fires on high ground so as to provide guidance to night travellers. When such travellers arrived at the fire, they would be given hospitality and warmth, or at least be guided on their way.

"I perceive a fire." This is what Moses first said on sighting the fire. The Arabic text uses the verb *ānast* for 'perceive' which carries connotations of friendliness. Thus, his words sound like: I can see a welcoming fire which should give us some comfort. We can ask directions which should tell us which way to go, and we could get a brand to warm ourselves. As Moses walked towards the fire, he received the call from on high: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed: Blessed are those in the fire and those around it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!'"* (Verses 8-9)

This is an address echoed by the whole universe, bringing together different worlds and cosmoses. All existence humbly submits to this call which shakes consciences and spirits. The heavens and earth perceive the strong bond linking them together, one which makes an insignificant particle of creation respond to the great Creator's call. Thus, a weak mortal is elevated, by God's grace, to a position from where he speaks directly to Him.

"When he came close to it, he was addressed..." (Verse 8) We note here the use of the passive voice, although the address is from a known source. Yet the passive formula is preferable because it implies reverence and glory for the Supreme Being making the address. *"Blessed are those in the fire and those around it!"* (Verse 8) Who were in the fire and who were around it? Most probably, it was unlike any fire we light. It was a fire coming from on high, lit up by angels who are pure, so as to give perfect guidance. It simply looked, at a distance, like a fire. Hence blessing is bestowed on the angels that were in and around it, including Moses who was moving closer towards it. The whole universe records this sublime gift, while the location remains a blessed one because God Almighty revealed His glory and bestowed His blessings there.

The universe also recorded the rest of the address: *"Limitless in His glory is God, the Lord of all the worlds. Moses! Truly, I am alone God, the Almighty, the Wise!"* (Verses 8-9) Thus God gives Himself the sublime position of glory due to Him and declares His Lordship over all the worlds. He informs His servant that the One addressing him is God, the Almighty, the Wise. All humanity, represented by Moses, is thus elevated to an extraordinarily high position. Moses found the information he sought at the fire, but it was a great piece of information, and something he never expected. He also received the warming brand, but this was a gift guiding him to the right path. The address was one meant to confirm that Moses was chosen by God, but such choice entails a duty to carry a message to the most wicked of tyrants. Hence, his Lord began to prepare and equip him for his mission.

"Now throw down your staff" (Verse 10) In this case the whole thing is given in a nutshell. We have little of the long discourse mentioned in *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Hā, because the emphasis here is laid on the call to Moses and his assignment. *"But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back."* (Verse 10) When he did as he was told and threw down his staff, he saw it come alive, writhing at speed like a small but fast-moving snake. His spontaneous nature caught up with him as he was totally taken by surprise. He could never have thought the staff would be so transformed on simply being thrown down. Hence, he ran away, with no thought of going back to take a further look at this serpent. His whole reaction suggests complete and utter surprise.

Yet he was soon reassured when the call from on high resumed. This now told him of the nature of his assignment: *"Moses, have no fear! [Said God]: Messengers have nothing to fear in My presence."* (Verse 10) He is told that he is entrusted with a message from God, and God's messengers entertain no fear in the presence of their Lord, as He informs them of their duties.

"If anyone has done wrong and then replaced the wrong with good; well, I am Much-Forgiving, Merciful." (Verse 11) Only those who do wrong should be afraid. However, those of them who replace wrong with good, abandoning injustice, evil and unbelief, making sure to replace them with justice and faith, and doing righteous deeds will receive God's grace and forgiveness.

Moses is now reassured and calm. Therefore, his Lord gives him his second miracle before even telling him about his mission or its nature: *"Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish."* (Verse 12) Again, Moses did as he was told, putting his hand through the top opening of his robe, and then bringing it out brilliant white. He had no skin disease. What happened was another miracle. God promised to support him with nine miraculous signs of the type of which he had just seen two. At this point Moses is also told of his assignment, for which he has been given such preparation. *"[This is one of] the nine signs for Pharaoh and his people. They are wicked people."* (Verse 12)

Here, the *sūrah* does not provide any details of these nine signs, though they are mentioned in *Sūrah 7,* The Heights. These were the years of drought, crop shortages, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. The lack of detail in this instance indicates that the emphasis here is on the miraculous nature of these signs, and the stubborn refusal of Pharaoh's people to acknowledge them and take heed: *"But when Our light-giving signs came to them, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Within their souls they knew them to be true, yet they, in their wickedness and arrogance, rejected them. Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evildoers."* (Verses 13-14)

Thus they were given numerous signs to bring the truth clearly before their eyes.

Indeed these signs are described here as '*light-giving*' which is rather an inadequate rendering of the Arabic adjective, *mubṣirah,* which means 'endowed with insight', as if the signs themselves can see the people and lead them to divine guidance. Yet they described these signs as *'plain sorcery'.* Although deep inside they were convinced that these were true signs confirming the truth of the message, they nevertheless repeated such claims out of '*their wickedness and arrogance.'* Yet *'within their souls they knew them to be true.'* Their attitude was one of stubborn rejection because they did not seek proof. They just did not want to believe, thus doing the truth they recognized profound injustice.

The same was true of the Quraysh elders. They were certain of the truth of the Qur'ān, but they persisted in denying it and rejecting the Prophet's call to believe in God alone. They wanted to continue with their false beliefs because of the privileges and gains they felt would be threatened if they were to abandon their religion. They realized that such gains and privileges depended totally on their false beliefs and that Islam was sure to do away with them. They felt their position to be very shaky, compared with the clear truth of Islam.

Such is the truth. Its rejecters do not deny it out of ignorance. They deny it because they know it to be the truth and realize that it threatens their interests and privileges. Hence, they deliberately reject it.

"Consider, then, what happened in the end to the evil-doers." (Verse 14) The end Pharaoh met is well known, and the Qur'ān tells us about it in other *sūrahs.* Here we have only this brief reference to it, as it may cause avowed opponents of the truth to reflect on the lessons of the past. It may, perchance, alert them to take heed before they too suffer a similar fate.

3
Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: 'All praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants.' (15)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا دَاوُۥدَ وَسُلَيْمَـٰنَ عِلْمًا ۖ وَقَالَا ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى فَضَّلَنَا عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّنْ عِبَادِهِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].' (16)

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمَـٰنُ دَاوُۥدَ ۖ وَقَالَ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ عُلِّمْنَا مَنطِقَ ٱلطَّيْرِ وَأُوتِينَا مِن كُلِّ شَىْءٍ ۖ إِنَّ هَـٰذَا لَهُوَ ٱلْفَضْلُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿١٦﴾

Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks. (17)

وَحُشِرَ لِسُلَيْمَـٰنَ جُنُودُهُۥ مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ وَٱلطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' (18)

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَتَوْا۟ عَلَىٰ وَادِ ٱلنَّمْلِ قَالَتْ نَمْلَةٌ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّمْلُ ٱدْخُلُوا۟ مَسَـٰكِنَكُمْ لَا يَحْطِمَنَّكُمْ سُلَيْمَـٰنُ وَجُنُودُهُۥ وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

He smiled joyously at her words, and said: 'My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.' (19)

فَتَبَسَّمَ ضَاحِكًا مِّن قَوْلِهَا وَقَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَـٰلِحًا تَرْضَىٰهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِى بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِى عِبَادِكَ

ٱلصَّـٰلِحِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? (20)

وَتَفَقَّدَ ٱلطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِىَ لَآ أَرَى
ٱلْهُدْهُدَ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْغَآئِبِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless he brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence]. (21)

لَأُعَذِّبَنَّهُۥ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا أَوْ لَأَا۟ذْبَحَنَّهُۥٓ
أَوْ لَيَأْتِيَنِّى بِسُلْطَـٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾

But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. (22)

فَمَكَثَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطتُ بِمَا لَمْ
تُحِطْ بِهِۦ وَجِئْتُكَ مِن سَبَإٍۭ بِنَبَإٍ يَقِينٍ
﴿٢٢﴾

I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. (23)

إِنِّى وَجَدتُّ ٱمْرَأَةً تَمْلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيَتْ مِن
كُلِّ شَىْءٍ وَلَهَا عَرْشٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. (24)

وَجَدتُّهَا وَقَوْمَهَا يَسْجُدُونَ لِلشَّمْسِ مِن
دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَـٰنُ أَعْمَـٰلَهُمْ
فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ فَهُمْ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ
﴿٢٤﴾

That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal; (25)

أَلَّا يَسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى يُخْرِجُ ٱلْخَبْءَ فِى
ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُخْفُونَ وَمَا
تُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.' (26)

ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلْعَرْشِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ۩
﴿٢٦﴾

Said [Solomon]: 'We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. (27)

۞ قَالَ سَنَنظُرُ أَصَدَقْتَ أَمْ كُنتَ مِنَ

ٱلْكَـٰذِبِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return.' (28)

ٱذْهَب بِّكِتَـٰبِى هَـٰذَا فَأَلْقِهْ إِلَيْهِمْ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّ
عَنْهُمْ فَٱنظُرْ مَاذَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

[The Queen of Sheba] said: 'Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. (29)

قَالَتْ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْمَلَؤُا۟ إِنِّىٓ أُلْقِىَ إِلَىَّ كِتَـٰبٌ
كَرِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

It is from Solomon, and it reads, "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: (30)

إِنَّهُۥ مِن سُلَيْمَـٰنَ وَإِنَّهُۥ بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ
ٱلرَّحْمَـٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God]." (31)

أَلَّا تَعْلُوا۟ عَلَىَّ وَأْتُونِى مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present.' (32)

قَالَتْ يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلْمَلَؤُا۟ أَفْتُونِى فِىٓ أَمْرِى مَا
كُنتُ قَاطِعَةً أَمْرًا حَتَّىٰ تَشْهَدُونِ ﴿٣٢﴾

They said: 'We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command.' (33)

قَالُوا۟ نَحْنُ أُو۟لُوا۟ قُوَّةٍ وَأُو۟لُوا۟ بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ
وَٱلْأَمْرُ إِلَيْكِ فَٱنظُرِى مَاذَا تَأْمُرِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Said she: 'When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. (34)

قَالَتْ إِنَّ ٱلْمُلُوكَ إِذَا دَخَلُوا۟ قَرْيَةً
أَفْسَدُوهَا وَجَعَلُوٓا۟ أَعِزَّةَ أَهْلِهَآ أَذِلَّةً ۖ
وَكَذَٰلِكَ يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back.' (35)

وَإِنِّى مُرْسِلَةٌ إِلَيْهِم بِهَدِيَّةٍ فَنَاظِرَةٌۢ بِمَ

يَرۡجِعُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلُونَ ٣٥

فَلَمَّا جَآءَ سُلَيۡمَٰنَ قَالَ أَتُمِدُّونَنِ بِمَالٖ
فَمَآ ءَاتَىٰنِۦَ ٱللَّهُ خَيۡرٞ مِّمَّآ ءَاتَىٰكُم بَلۡ
أَنتُم بِهَدِيَّتِكُمۡ تَفۡرَحُونَ ٣٦

When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: 'Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. (36)

ٱرۡجِعۡ إِلَيۡهِمۡ فَلَنَأۡتِيَنَّهُم بِجُنُودٖ لَّا قِبَلَ لَهُم
بِهَا وَلَنُخۡرِجَنَّهُم مِّنۡهَآ أَذِلَّةٗ وَهُمۡ صَٰغِرُونَ
٣٧

Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.' (37)

قَالَ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ أَيُّكُمۡ يَأۡتِينِي بِعَرۡشِهَا
قَبۡلَ أَن يَأۡتُونِي مُسۡلِمِينَ ٣٨

Solomon said: 'Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' (38)

قَالَ عِفۡرِيتٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡجِنِّ أَنَا۠ ءَاتِيكَ بِهِۦ
قَبۡلَ أَن تَقُومَ مِن مَّقَامِكَۖ وَإِنِّي عَلَيۡهِ
لَقَوِيٌّ أَمِينٞ ٣٩

Said an efreet of the jinn: 'I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' (39)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِي عِندَهُۥ عِلۡمٞ مِّنَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ أَنَا۠
ءَاتِيكَ بِهِۦ قَبۡلَ أَن يَرۡتَدَّ إِلَيۡكَ طَرۡفُكَۚ
فَلَمَّا رَءَاهُ مُسۡتَقِرًّا عِندَهُۥ قَالَ هَٰذَا مِن
فَضۡلِ رَبِّي لِيَبۡلُوَنِيٓ ءَأَشۡكُرُ أَمۡ أَكۡفُرُۖ وَمَن
شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشۡكُرُ لِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ
رَبِّي غَنِيّٞ كَرِيمٞ ٤٠

But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: 'I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.' When he saw it standing before him, he said: 'This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self-sufficient, most generous.' (40)

قَالَ نَكِّرُواْ لَهَا عَرۡشَهَا نَنظُرۡ أَتَهۡتَدِيٓ أَمۡ

He [then] said: 'Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided.' (41)

تَكُونُ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يَهۡتَدُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: 'It looks as though it were the same.' [Said Solomon]: 'We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves to God. (42)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡ قِيلَ أَهَٰكَذَا عَرۡشُكِۖ قَالَتۡ كَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَۚ وَأُوتِينَا ٱلۡعِلۡمَ مِن قَبۡلِهَا وَكُنَّا مُسۡلِمِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation.' (43)

وَصَدَّهَا مَا كَانَت تَّعۡبُدُ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِۖ إِنَّهَا كَانَتۡ مِن قَوۡمٖ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٤٣﴾

She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: 'It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!' She said: '0 my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself, with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (44)

قِيلَ لَهَا ٱدۡخُلِي ٱلصَّرۡحَۖ فَلَمَّا رَأَتۡهُ حَسِبَتۡهُ لُجَّةٗ وَكَشَفَتۡ عَن سَاقَيۡهَاۚ قَالَ إِنَّهُۥ صَرۡحٞ مُّمَرَّدٞ مِّن قَوَارِيرَۗ قَالَتۡ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمۡتُ نَفۡسِي وَأَسۡلَمۡتُ مَعَ سُلَيۡمَٰنَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Overview

In this passage we have a short reference to David and a more complete account of Solomon, following immediately after the short episode of Moses. All three were prophets sent to the Children of Israel. Yet these stories occur in a *sūrah* that opens with a description of the Qur'ān. Later it says: *"This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree."* (Verse 76)

As related here, Solomon's story provides far more details than anywhere else in the Qur'ān, but it concentrates only on one episode which relates what he did with the hoopoe and with the Queen of Sheba. A preamble to the story quotes Solomon as he declares to all people that God has granted him the ability to talk to birds and understand their speech, and He has further given him of all things. He expresses his thanks to God for such clear favours He has bestowed on him. We then see him inspecting a procession that included humans, *jinn* and birds, before we note a warning given by one ant to its community lest they be stamped upon. Solomon understands the ant's discourse and again he expresses his gratitude to God. He

realizes that such favours constitute a test, and he prays to God that he will be successful in this test.

These stories of Moses, David and Solomon are perhaps the most important in the history of the Children of Israel. They fit well with what the *sūrah* says in its opening about the Qur'ān which, in turn, explains to the Children of Israel most of their disputes. Furthermore, the details given here about Solomon are especially suited to the subject matter of this *sūrah.* This is clearly apparent in several instances. Firstly, the whole *sūrah* lays great emphasis on knowledge. The first words regarding David and Solomon are: *"We granted knowledge to David and Solomon."* (Verse 15) Solomon's address begins with a reference to his knowledge of the language of the birds: *"We have been taught the speech of birds."* (Verse 16) As the story progresses, the hoopoe excuses itself for its absence: *"I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information."* (Verse 22) Besides, the one who brings the queen's throne to Solomon in no time is *"the one who was deeply versed in the Book."* (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* opens with a reference to the Qur'ān, God's clear and elucidating book sent to the unbelievers, yet they refuse to believe and adopt an incredulous attitude. In Solomon's story, reference is made to the epistle he sent the Queen of Sheba. It does not take long before she and her people declare their belief in and submission to God. She did so when she saw the superior powers given to Solomon, making the *jinn,* humans and birds subservient to him. But it was God who placed these and other powers under Solomon's command. God has sway over all His creation, and He is the Lord of the truly magnificent throne.

The *sūrah* also looks at a variety of God's favours granted to people, and a variety of signs He has placed in the universe. It refers to the fact that He has placed man in charge of the earth but most men deny His signs, refusing to believe in Him or show their gratitude. Solomon, however, is an example of a truly grateful servant, who appeals to his Lord to guide him to be truly thankful. Enjoyment of his favours does not corrupt his upright nature, nor does the power at his command lead him to tyranny or transgression.

The passage about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is a very good example of the Qur'ānic art of story telling. The story is full of movement and action, rich in feeling and scenery. Highlighting certain images and separating them with suitable gaps are two more aspects of the unique method of the Qur'ān.

A Brief Reference and a Detailed Account

For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon, and both of them said: All

praise is due to God who has favoured us above many of His believing servants. (Verse 15)

This is the starting signal that opens the story. It reports on the most important favour God granted to David and Solomon (peace be upon them both). As for David, the details of what knowledge God imparted to him are given in other *sūrahs.* These include his fine and enchanting recitation of Psalms which was echoed by the universe around him. The mountains and the birds sang God's praises with him because of the sweetness of his voice, his profound sincerity and deep feeling as he addressed his Lord. All barriers and impediments between him and the universe were removed. He was skilled in making protective garments which were particularly useful in war. Iron and sharp, tough objects were softened for him so that he was able to use them the way he liked. He was also taught how to judge between people, which was a favour also shared by Solomon.

The *sūrah* also gives us an account of some of the favours God granted Solomon, particularly his knowledge of the speech of birds and other creatures. This is in addition to what is mentioned in other *sūrahs,* such as his ability to judge in intricate disputes, and the fact that the winds were made subject to his command, by God's grace.

The story begins with the reference to knowledge: *"For sure, We granted knowledge to David and Solomon."* (Verse 15) Before the verse concludes we are told of their thanksgiving to God for this favour. They stress the great value and benefit of knowledge, and declare their praise of God for it. Thus, the value of knowledge is enhanced, and it becomes clear that people with knowledge are favoured highly.

We are not told here of the type or speciality of the knowledge given to these two prophets because the emphasis is on knowledge in its entirety. This gives us the further connotation that all knowledge is a gift from God, and that it behoves every person of knowledge to know the source of such knowledge. This makes all those endowed with knowledge turn to God, praising Him, and motivates them to use their knowledge in ways that please the great Giver. Thus, knowledge, which is an aspect of God's favour, does not turn people away from God. Any knowledge that does so is deviant, moving away from its source and missing its goal. Nor does it bring happiness to the one who possesses it. Instead, it brings only misery, fear, worry and destruction.

Today humanity has achieved a good standard in a particular branch of science, being able to induce nuclear fusion and use nuclear energy. But what has humanity benefited by such knowledge whose possessors neither remember, fear or praise God, nor use their knowledge in His service? What result has humanity reaped other than the horrific tragedy of nuclear bombs being dropped on Hiroshima and

Nagasaki, and the worry and fear of destruction that people in the West and the East experience?[6]

The story then progresses concentrating on Solomon only: *"Solomon inherited David. He said: 'O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things. This is indeed a manifest favour [from God].'"* (Verse 16) David was given kingship alongside prophethood and knowledge, but it is knowledge, rather than kingship, that is mentioned in this context because being a king is too trivial by comparison.

It is clear that the inheritance intended here is that of knowledge, because it is the main blessing which deserves mention. This is confirmed by Solomon's declaration to his people: *"D people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things."* (Verse 16) He highlights the fact that he has been taught the language of birds, and mentions other favours in a general way, but he attributes both to the same source, which is not David, his father. Indeed, none of this did he inherit from his father.

Removing the Barriers of Nature

"O people! We have been taught the speech of birds, and have been given of all good things." (Verse 16) Thus Solomon announces to all people that these are aspects of God's favours granted to him. He seeks no special position as a result. Indeed, he describes such favours as they truly are: *"This is indeed a manifest favour [from God]."* (Verse 16) It is a favour that makes its source known to all. No one can teach the language of birds to man other than God, and no one can give anyone a measure of all good things except God.

Birds, animals and insects have their own means of communication, which are in fact their languages. God, the Creator of all these says: *"There is not an animal that walks on earth and no bird that flies on its wings but are communities like your own."* (6: 38)

[6] After two bombs were dropped on Japan, a member of the industrial authority working on production of the British bomb, and who was a professor at the University of Birmingham, wrote: "I am certain that it will not be long before the production of bombs, with greater explosive power, perhaps by 10,000 tons or more, and then there will be bombs with explosive power reaching one million tons. Nothing will ensure protection against such bombs, six of which will be sufficient to wipe England off the face of the earth." His prediction has been fulfilled, and the great powers have produced bombs so powerful that they make the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem no more than children's toys. Perhaps we should mention here that the Hiroshima bomb immediately killed between 210,000 and 240,000 other than causing burns and disfigurement to scores of thousands of people. * It should be remembered that this was written in 1954, when the arms race was in full swing. The author does not give the source of his quotation, and the name of the professor is written in Arabic letters only, making it very difficult to identify him with any degree of accuracy. — Editor's note.

They cannot form communities unless they have ties and bonds which they maintain, and some means of communication with which to understand each other. This is clearly observed in many species of bird, animal and insect. Biologists who are interested in certain species try hard to understand a little of their languages, but they can only rely on guesswork which does not approach any degree of certainty. What God granted to Solomon was something special, a miracle that goes beyond the laws of nature familiar to man. The knowledge he acquired was not through any attempt he had made to understand these species; it was a gift from God.

It is important to emphasize this point so as to make it clearly understood. Some contemporary commentators on the Qur'ān are too impressed by modern scientific achievements. Hence they try to explain what the Qur'ān says about Solomon as similar to the attempts by biologists to understand the methods of communication used by birds and animals. Thus, they force the miracle God granted to Solomon out of its nature. They also give scientific discoveries a degree of importance far greater than what they deserve. It is perfectly easy for God to teach one of His servants the languages of birds, animals and insects, as a special favour, and without any effort on that person's part. This does not require more than the lifting of some barriers God has placed between different species when He created them all.

Yet this is only one part of the miracle God granted to Solomon, His servant. The other part was that a number of the *jinn* and birds were placed under his command, serving him like human servants would. Moreover, the birds thus placed under him were given special faculties far greater than ordinary birds of the same species. This is clearly apparent in the story of the hoopoe who was able to understand the situation at the Queen of Sheba's court as clearly as a most intelligent and religious person. This is again a miraculous aspect.

It is a fact that the law God has set for His creation allows birds a measure of understanding that may vary, but this measure remains well below what man understands. That birds have their own form is merely part of the overall balance maintained in the universe. It is subject to the general law of creation.

Another fact is that a hoopoe living today is exactly the same as other hoopoes that have lived on earth for a very long time. Its genes are such that they make it, practically, a clone of the first hoopoe. Whatever adaptations the hoopoe has gone through does not enable it to move on to a higher species. This is clearly part of the system and balance God has set for His creation.

The two facts mentioned above cannot preclude the working of a miracle whenever God, the Creator of all species and laws governing them wants it. The miracle itself may be a part of the overall law of creation, which we do not know in full. If it is, then this part occurs at the time appointed for it, which is known only to

God. As it occurs, it transcends the natural laws familiar to man, but it thus complements the divine laws of creation and balance. This explains how Solomon's hoopoe came into existence, and perhaps all the birds that were placed under Solomon's command at that time.

A Majestic Procession for Solomon

"Before Solomon were marshalled his troops of jinn, *humans and birds; and they were all lined in orderly ranks."* (Verse 17) This is a big procession in which are marshalled all troops, *jinn,* human and bird. Naturally, men are well known to us, but the *jinn* are creatures about whom we know nothing more than what God has said in the Qur'ān. They were created from flames, and can see us while we cannot see them: *"Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them."* (7: 27) [The reference in this verse is to *Iblīs,* or Satan, who belongs to the *jinn.]* They are able to prompt people and tempt them to take evil and sinful actions. We do not know how this takes place. We also know that a group of them believed in God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He did not meet or see them, but God informed him of what happened: *"Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a group of the* jinn *listened [to the Qur'ān]', and said: 'We have listened to a wonderful discourse that guides to what is right, and so we have come to believe in it. We shall never associate any partners with our Lord.'"* (72: 1-2) We also know that God made some of them serve Solomon, making for him whatever he wished of sanctuaries, statues, and large cauldrons for cooking. They also dived into the sea for him, and did his bidding. Some were in his procession side by side with humans and birds.

We say that God placed under Solomon's command only a section of the *jinn,* birds, and humans. Thus it is clear that not all people on earth were his subjects, because his kingdom stretched over an area that includes today's Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, up to the Euphrates. Similarly, not all *the jinn* or birds were under his command; rather it was a section of each type.

In support of this view about the *jinn* we cite the fact that *Iblīs,* or Satan, and his offspring belong to the *jinn* as the Qur'ān states:

> *When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so Iblīs, who belonged to the jinn and he disobeyed his Lord's command."* (18: 50) *God also says about Iblīs: "who whispers in the hearts of mankind, from among jinn and mankind. (114: 5-6)*

Thus *Iblīs* and his offspring who all belonged to the *jinn* continued to whisper in people's hearts tempting them to sin during Solomon's reign. Had they been placed

under his command, they would not have been able to do so since he was a prophet advocating what is right. Hence, it is clear that only a section of them were loyal to Solomon.

In support of our view concerning the birds, we say that Solomon learnt of the hoopoe's absence when he inspected the birds. Had all birds, including all hoopoes, been placed under him, they would have been marshalled in his procession, and he would never have been able to discover the absence of one hoopoe among millions of hoopoes, and many millions of birds. He would not have wondered: *"Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe?"* (Verse 20) Indeed, this question suggests that it was a particular hoopoe which he identified. It might be that it was the only hoopoe under Solomon's command, or that it was the one in a group of hoopoes whose duty was to take part in that particular procession. What supports this view is that we soon realize that the hoopoe in question was gifted with an understanding that transcends what hoopoes and all birds normally possess. Such gifts must have been granted to those placed under Solomon's command, and not to hoopoes and birds in general. Indeed, the hoopoe in the story appears to have a gift of understanding matched only by intelligent and God- fearing humans.

So, this great procession was ready before Solomon, *"and they were all lined in orderly ranks,"* so that there would be no chance of disorder. They are described as 'troops' in the verse to indicate the orderly nature of the procession.

> *At length, when they came to a valley of ants, one ant said: 'Go into your dwellings, ants, lest Solomon and his troops inadvertently crush you.' He smiled joyously at her words, and said: My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may do righteous deeds which will please You; and include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants.'* (Verses 18-19)

So the procession moved forward in an orderly manner, until they reached a valley where ants were in plenty. In fact the *sūrah* describes the place as a valley of ants. At this point, an ant supervisor made an announcement to all other ants in the vicinity. It should be remembered that, like bees, ants live in complex social colonies in which different ants have different functions and duties that are organized according to an elaborate system that we might find too difficult to emulate, despite our superior intelligence. So, the supervisor ant announced in the manner of communication used by ants that they should hasten back to their dwellings, so that Solomon and his troops would not crush them unawares.

Solomon understood what she said and was pleased. His pleasure was two-fold: he smiled at her words like an adult smiles to a child who tries to evade him, fearing

that the adult wants to punish him when he has no such intention. Plus he was gratified that God has given him this gift which opened up for him worlds that are normally closed to mankind. He was also joyful at the fact that ants should have such understanding, with the ability to give orders and carry them out.

When Solomon gathered what the ant said, *he smiled joyously at her words.'* Yet he soon realized what had just happened. He realized that it was all a great gift God had granted him, lifting the barriers that separate different types of creation. He therefore turned to God in acknowledgement of His favours: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents."* (Verse 19) It is a direct address to his Lord, one that expresses the feeling that He is so close to him. He wants his whole being: organs, feelings and thoughts; heart, mind and tongue; words, actions and directions; talents, abilities and energies to be brought together to offer thanks for all the favours bestowed on him and his parents. Solomon's prayer indicates how profound his appreciation of God's grace was. He felt that God's blessings overwhelmed his whole being as also his parents'. Hence, he wanted to give due thanks with his whole being: *"My Lord! Direct my whole being so that I will always be grateful for Your grace which You have bestowed on me and on my parents."* (Verse 19)

"And that I may do righteous deeds which will please You." (Verse 19) To do good deeds is also a blessing from God to which He directs those who are genuinely grateful for His gifts. Solomon, a truly grateful servant of God who prays for His help so that he would wholeheartedly express his gratitude, also prays to Him to guide him to do what will earn His pleasure.

"And include me, by Your grace, among Your righteous servants." (Verse 19) Solomon knows that to be included among God's righteous servants is an aspect of God's mercy. When it is bestowed on a servant of God, it guides him to do righteous deeds, and thus he is included in this best group of God's servants. We note that Solomon, a prophet at whose disposal God placed large sections of *jinn,* birds and people, does not take anything for granted. He fears lest his deeds or thanksgiving might not be up to the standard expected of him. This is a case of refined sensitivity that enhances Solomon's aspiration to gain God's pleasure and receive His mercy. It is expressed at the moment God's grace is brought into view, as when the ant's warning to other ants focuses attention on God's grace that made Solomon understand her speech.

We see here two miracles, not one. The first is Solomon listening to the ant and understanding her warning to her community. The second is the ant's awareness that the approaching people were Solomon and his troops. We know that the first pertains to what God taught Solomon, a man and a prophet. Comparatively speaking, this is more probable than the second miracle which is clear in the ant's words. An ant may recognize that the approaching procession consists of gigantic

creatures who could easily crush tiny ones like ants if they step on them. Prompted by the survival instinct God has given them, ants may flee such a danger. But for an ant to recognize Solomon and his troops is miraculous indeed.

The Story Unfolds

All this was a prelude to Solomon's story with the Queen of Sheba in which the hoopoe plays an important role. The story is told in six scenes with certain aspects deliberately left out, but which do not impair our understanding. Indeed, these gaps serve to enhance the artistic beauty of the story. Furthermore, some scenes carry a commentary, alerting us to their spiritual significance and enhancing the moral portrayed. These stylistic features combine in such a way as to ensure the perfect harmony of the verses.

Since the reference to Solomon began by mentioning the *jinn,* humans and birds, as well as highlighting the importance of knowledge, the story gives roles to all three aspects of creation, thus showing the value of knowledge. It is as if the opening verses deliberately identify the key actors in the story. This, then, is one of the Qur'ān's finer artistic features in storytelling.

As told in the *sūrah,* the story paints the personal and distinctive features of the main characters: Solomon, the queen, the hoopoe and the queen's courtiers. It portrays the different reactions from these characters in the various situations presented.

The first scene begins with the military parade, after the procession has passed the valley of the ants:

> *He inspected the birds and said: 'Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees? I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him, unless He brings me a clear warrant' [for his absence].* (Verses 20-21)

We see Solomon, a prophet and a king, marshalling his troops, and inspecting the birds only to discover the hoopoe's absence. We understand that this is a special hoopoe, with a specific position assigned to it in the procession. It was not just one of thousands or millions of hoopoes on the face of the earth. We note that Solomon was alert enough to miss a mere soldier in the great multitude composed of *jinn,* men and birds. His enquiry is of the type that befits a commander: it is flexible, looking at the different possibilities: *"Why is it that I do not see the hoopoe? Is he among the absentees?"* (Verse 20)

It soon becomes clear to all that the hoopoe is absent without permission. The

matter needed to be dealt with firmly so as to keep matters under control, particularly because its absence was no longer a secret. Hence, Solomon threatens the absent hoopoe: *"I will certainly punish him severely, or I will kill him."* (Verse 21) But Solomon is not a tyrant; he is a prophet. He does not issue a final judgement on the hoopoe before listening to what it has to say in its defence. Therefore, we immediately see Solomon as a just ruler: *"Unless he brings me a clear warrant,"* to justify his absence.

The curtains are drawn here, or maybe the scene continues as the hoopoe arrives. He carries an important and surprising piece of news for Solomon, as also for us who are observing events as they unfold:

> *But the hoopoe did not take long in coming. He said: 'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you, and I come to you from Sheba with accurate information. I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is a magnificent throne. I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way. That they should not prostrate themselves in worship of God who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and knows what you conceal and what you reveal. God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne.'* (Verses 22-26)

The hoopoe is fully aware of the king's firm and serious demeanour. Therefore, he begins his report with a surprise that overshadows the fault of his absence and ensures that the king will listen to him: *'I have just learnt things that are unknown to you."* What king would not listen when one of his subjects tells him that he has learnt something that he could not know? Now that the hoopoe has the king's attention, it proceeds to give the news he brought from Sheba, in Yemen. He mentions first that *"I found there a woman ruling over them,"* and he further adds that *"she has been given of all good things,"* which tells that her kingdom was affluent, powerful and civilized. Furthermore, the queen's *"is a magnificent throne."* (Verse 23) She sits on a magnificent couch which indicates the presence of skilled workers. The hoopoe adds that he found both the queen and her people *"prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God."* (Verse 24) He explains that these people had erred because Satan had deceived them, making their deeds seem fair to them. Thus, they are bereft of guidance, and as such they do not worship God Almighty *"who brings forth all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 25) *What is hidden'* refers to everything that is concealed, including the rain from the sky and the plants of the earth. It also includes the secrets of the heavens and the earth. He also *"knows what you conceal and what you reveal."* (Verse 25) This mirrors what is hidden in the heavens and earth as it

refers to what is hidden within one's own soul.

Until this point the hoopoe remains in the position of someone who has broken the rules and is still awaiting the king's judgement. Hence, it concludes the news it brought with a reference to God Almighty, the Lord of all, and the Lord of the magnificent throne, to which no human throne can be compared: *"God, other than whom there is no deity, the Lord of the [truly] magnificent Throne."* (Verse 26) This reference is meant as a reminder to the king so as to moderate his attitude as he remembers God's great power. It is, in short, a subtle appeal for compassion.

What we see here is a remarkable, intelligent hoopoe who has faith. He presents what he saw very skilfully, aware of its position, and relying on subtle expression. It understands that the woman is a queen and the people around her are her subjects, and it is fully aware that they prostrate themselves before the sun, instead of God. It also knows that such worship should be offered only to God who is the Lord of all the universe. This is not how hoopoes generally look at matters and understand them. Such understanding by a hoopoe is indeed miraculous.

Exchange with a Powerful Queen

Solomon does not judge the matter hastily. He is not too thrilled with the news brought by the hoopoe. He wants to be sure before taking any action. This is the appropriate course to follow by a fair prophet and a wise king:

> *Said [Solomon]: We shall see whether you have told the truth or you are a liar. Go with this my letter and deliver it to them; and then draw back from them, and see what answer they return.* (Verses 27-28)

At this point the contents of the letter are not revealed. They are left until it is delivered when interest is at its highest.

The curtains are drawn here. When they are lifted again, we are in the presence of the Queen of Sheba, after the letter has been delivered to her. She is in consultation with her advisers:

> *[The Queen of Sheba] said: Know, my nobles, that a worthy letter has been delivered to me. It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God].'*(Verses 29-31)

As she tells them of the letter we gather that most probably she did not know how the letter was delivered or by whom. She uses the passive voice in her report of its

delivery. Had she known that it was a hoopoe who delivered it, as some commentaries on the Qur'ān suggest, she would surely have reported this as a remarkable and extraordinary event. Nevertheless, she describes the letter as *"worthy',* either because of its shape, appearance, the seal it bears or because of its contents which she reports to her advisers: *"It is from Solomon, and it reads, 'In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent: Do not exalt yourselves against me, but come to me in submission [to God]."* (Verses 30-31) She did not worship God, but the whole region knew about Solomon and his status. Besides, the language of the letter was clear, decisive and to the point.

What the letter stated was very clear, simple and powerful. It began with the name of God, the Most Merciful, and made a single demand: that the queen and her people must not take a hostile or belligerent attitude towards its sender; rather, they should go to him declaring their submission to God, in whose name he addressed them.

Having reported on the letter and its contents, the queen requested advice, declaring that she would not make a decision without their consultation and consent: *"Nobles, counsel me in this my affair; no decision on any matter do I take unless you are present."* (Verse 32) Thus she appears to be a very wise queen. It is clear at the outset that she was greatly impressed by the letter, yet she also appears serious and decisive. She imparted this to her advisers by describing the letter as *'worthy'*. It is clear that she wants neither opposition nor belligerency. She does not say this openly; instead, she prepares the way for it by the line she takes. She then requests their advice.

As is customary with courtiers, they declared their readiness to do whatever was demanded of them, but they left the final decision to the queen: *"They said: We are endowed with power and with mighty prowess in war; but the command is yours. Consider, then, what you would command."* (Verse 33)

Now we see the woman, rather than the queen, expressing her feelings. A woman instinctively hates war and the destruction it brings in its wake. Therefore, she decides to seek peace and conciliation rather than resistance and conflict:

> *Said she: When kings enter a country, they despoil it, and make the noble ones of its people the most abject. Thus do they behave. Hence, I am going to send these people a gift and wait to see what the envoys bring back.* (Verses 34-35)

The queen is fully aware that when kings occupy a city or a country, they wreak havoc, destroying everything, so as to break all resistance. In particular, they target its chiefs, seeking to humiliate them as they are the ones who put up resistance. This is clearly the habit of all domineering kings. She is also aware that a gift wins hearts and emphasizes friendship. It may also remove the threat of war. Hence, her

approach was certainly worth a try. If Solomon accepted the gift, then he was after something that belonged to this world. She would then know that normal worldly means would be effective. If he refused the gift, then it was all a question of faith which he would pursue with diligence, accepting no compromise.

This scene is concluded at this point. When the curtains are lifted again we see the queen's emissaries delivering her gift to Solomon who takes them to task for thinking that they could buy his peace with money, seeking to divert him from calling on them to believe in God. He announced his final ultimatum, in clear and powerful terms:

> *When [the queen's envoy] came to Solomon, he said: Is it gold that you would give me? What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you. Yet you rejoice with your own gift. Go back to them, for we shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match, and we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled.'* (Verses 36-37)

His answer derides money, scorning its use in a situation that involves advocacy of the faith, where it can be of no use: *"Is it gold that you would give me?"* Are you making me such a trivial offer? *"What God has given me is much better than all that He has given you."* (Verse 36) He has given me things that are far superior to wealth; namely, knowledge, prophethood and the service of the *jinn* and birds. No material thing, rich as it may be, holds any attraction for me: *"Yet you rejoice with your own gift."* (Verse 36) Such worldly luxuries may please the likes of you who have no bond with God and who do not receive His gifts.

He follows this with a new ultimatum, saying to the queen's envoy: *"Go back to them,"* and take your gift with you. Tell them to await their inevitable defeat: *"We shall certainly come to them with forces they cannot match."* (Verse 37) Such forces have never been placed under any person's command. The queen and her powerful army are no match for them. *"And we shall certainly drive them from the land in disgrace, and they will be utterly humbled."* (Verse 37)

The curtains are drawn, and the envoys are dismissed. The *sūrah* does not add a further word about them. It is as if the whole matter is settled and needs no further comment.

Waiting for the Queen

We now see Solomon fully aware that his answer will settle the matter with the queen, whom he realized had no wish for conflict. Indeed, he felt that she was likely to respond to his call. The *sūrah,* however, does not mention how her envoys

returned, what they said to her, and how she made up her mind. There is a gap here, but we learn from what comes afterwards that she planned to go to Solomon, and that he was aware of her intention. Hence, he discusses with his commanders how to bring him her throne which she had left well guarded in her palace:

> *Solomon said: "Which of you, nobles, can bring me her throne before they come to me in submission?' Said an afreet of the jinn: I shall bring it to you before you rise from your position. I am powerful enough to do it, and worthy of trust.' But the one who was deeply versed in the Book said: I shall bring it to you within the twinkling of your eye.'* (Verses 38-40)

What was Solomon's objective behind bringing her throne before she arrived and declared her submission to God? Most probably he wanted to show her some aspect of the superior power placed at his command. This was likely to win her heart and influence her to believe in God.

An afreet from among the *jinn* offered to bring the throne to him before he had finished the session he was attending. It is reported that he sat from morning till noon to judge in disputes that were put to him. Apparently, Solomon felt that this was too long a time to wait. Therefore, a person 'who was deeply versed in the Book' offered to bring it in the twinkling of an eye. The *sūrah* does not mention the name of that person, nor does it say which was the book known to him. We understand, however, that he was a believer who had a strong bond with God, and had some divine secret that allowed him to use something of the great power that transcends barriers and distances. This is something that at times occurs to some people with very strong faith. No explanation is offered for it, because it goes beyond what is familiar to people. This, then, is all that we can say without delving into the realm of legend and superstition.

Some commentators on the Qur'ān add certain details. Some say that the book mentioned in the verse is the Torah; others say that the person knew God's greatest name; and others still have offered yet more suggestions. None of these, however, gives us any explanation that carries any degree of certainty. Yet the matter is much simpler than all such explanations. Countless are the secrets we know nothing about in the universe around us, and numerous also are the powers that we do not use ourselves. Indeed, within the human soul there are many secrets and powers that we cannot fathom. When God wants to inform any of His servants of one of these secrets or powers that person will accomplish something of a miraculous nature that goes beyond what is familiar. It is all accomplished by God's will and design. No one other than a true servant of God will be able to accomplish such feats.

The person in Solomon's story who is described as *deeply versed in the Book'* was

able, by the knowledge imparted to him, to use some secret or power that enabled him to accomplish the miraculous bringing over of the queen's throne to Solomon. His knowledge of the Book established a bond between him and his Lord that made him able to do what was required.

Some commentators suggest that this was Solomon himself, but we think it was more likely that it was a different person. Had it been Solomon, the *sūrah* would have mentioned this given that the whole story is about him. There would have been no need to withhold his name at this remarkable juncture. Some say that his name was Assaf ben Berachia, but we have no evidence to support this.

> *When he saw it standing before him, he said: This is by the grace of my Lord, so as to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful. He who is grateful [to God] is but grateful for his own good. As for him who is ungrateful... My Lord is self sufficient, most generous.* (Verse 40)

Solomon was clearly in awe of God's majesty as He fulfilled his requests in such a supernatural way. He also felt that such grace constituted a serious test for him personally. To pass such a test successfully he would need to be very alert, as also need help from God. He also needed to recognize God's favours and to be genuinely grateful for them. Needless to say, God needed no thanks from anyone, but the one who thanks God for His favours does so for his own good, because his thanks ensure that more favours will come his way. In this way, then Solomon would be better able to pass the test. As for those who are ungrateful, they should know that God has no need of them or their gratitude; He is most generous, granting favours and expecting neither return nor gratitude.

A Confrontation of Sorts

Now Solomon continues preparing some surprises for the Queen of Sheba whom he expected would arrive shortly: *"He [then] said: Alter the appearance of her throne: let us see whether she will be able to recognize it, or she will remain unguided."* (Verse 41) He wanted the distinctive features of her throne to be changed, so as to gauge her intelligence and alertness. Would she be able to recognize it, or would the change confuse her such that she could not see it?

Perhaps Solomon wanted to test her presence of mind and her reaction at the point of surprise as she saw the throne. Therefore, we are presented with a picture of the queen with Solomon: *"So when she arrived, she was asked: 'Is your throne like this?' She answered: "It looks as though it were the same.'"* (Verse 42) This was a shock for the queen. She could have never thought it possible that the throne she was looking at

was her own. She had left it in her own country, where it was well guarded. What could bring it to Jerusalem, Solomon's capital? Who could bring it and how? Yet she could see that it was hers, despite the alterations. Should she deny this on the basis of the realities of the situation, or should she say that it was hers, considering all the similarities? Her answer was thoughtful and clever: *"It looks as though it were the same."* (Verse 42) She neither denied nor confirmed it. In fact her answer is indicative of a sharp intelligence and quick presence of mind.

We have here another gap which suggests that she was informed of the surprise and its secret. In reply she said that she was already prepared to surrender herself to God from the moment she had decided to come to Solomon after he had turned down her gift: *"We were endowed with knowledge before her, and we have surrendered ourselves."* (Verse 42)

The *sūrah* then explains what prevented her from believing in God up to that point and what had turned her away from surrendering herself to God when Solomon's letter was first delivered to her. She had grown up in the midst of an unbelieving people. Her worship of creatures that were far from equal to God, such as the sun, actually prevented her from worshipping Him alone: *"Yet that which she used to worship instead of God had kept her away [from the true faith]. She belonged to an unbelieving nation."* (Verse 43)

Solomon had already prepared another surprise for the queen, which thus far remains hidden from us. With the first one, we were told of it before it actually occurred, but here the method is different:

> *She was told to enter the court. When she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she bared her legs. Said he: "It is but a court smoothly paved with glass!' She said: '0 my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, but now I submit myself with Solomon, to God, the Lord of all the worlds.'* (Verse 44)

This surprise consisted of a palace made of glass, and its floor placed above water so as to appear like a lake. When she was asked to enter the palace, she thought that she was meant to walk through the lake and so lifted her skirts to bare her legs. The surprise was then complete. Now Solomon tells her its secret: *"It is but a court smoothly paved with glass."* (Verse 44) The queen stood agape, perfectly amazed at such wondrous accomplishments that defy human capabilities. She recognized that Solomon had been given superior powers. Therefore, she turned to God acknowledging her past error, declaring that she had wronged herself when she worshipped others, and announcing her submission, not to Solomon, but with him, *"to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 44)

Thus her heart had interacted with divine guidance and benefitted by its light. She

realized that surrendering to God did not mean her submission to anyone of His creatures, not even to Solomon, the prophet and the king who had been given all these miracles. True surrender is to God, the Lord of all the worlds, being in companionship with those who believe in Him and who advocate His message, on the basis of equality.

The *sūrah* highlights this point in order to clarify the nature of belief in God and surrender to Him. It imparts the sort of dignity that raises the vanquished to the ranks of the victors, such that they become brothers in faith. In fact, there are no vanquished or victors. How can there be when they are truly brothers, tied by the bond of faith, feeling their equality in God's sight?

The elders of the Quraysh who opposed the Prophet in Makkah felt it far beneath them that they should be under Muhammad's leadership. Here we see a woman of the past teaching them that Islam places the advocate of the divine message and those who are addressed by that advocate on the same basis. Leader and subordinates are equals, treated in the same way. People simply respond to God's Messenger and submit with him to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

4
Plotting to Kill a Prophet

To the Thamūd We sent their brother, Ṣāliĥ, and he said: "Worship God alone', but they split into two contending factions. (45)

وَلَقَدۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَآ إِلَىٰ ثَمُودَ أَخَاهُمۡ صَٰلِحًا أَنِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ فَإِذَا هُمۡ فَرِيقَانِ يَخۡتَصِمُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Said [Ṣāliĥ]: "My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?' (46)

قَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ لِمَ تَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ قَبۡلَ ٱلۡحَسَنَةِۖ لَوۡلَا تَسۡتَغۡفِرُونَ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تُرۡحَمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

They answered: "We augur evil from you and those that follow you.' Said he: "The evil you augur can come only from God. You are indeed people undergoing a test.' (47)

قَالُواْ ٱطَّيَّرۡنَا بِكَ وَبِمَن مَّعَكَۚ قَالَ طَٰٓئِرُكُمۡ عِندَ ٱللَّهِۖ بَلۡ أَنتُمۡ قَوۡمٞ تُفۡتَنُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. (48)

وَكَانَ فِي ٱلۡمَدِينَةِ تِسۡعَةُ رَهۡطٖ يُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا يُصۡلِحُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth." (49)

قَالُواْ تَقَاسَمُواْ بِٱللَّهِ لَنُبَيِّتَنَّهُۥ وَأَهۡلَهُۥ ثُمَّ لَنَقُولَنَّ لِوَلِيِّهِۦ مَا شَهِدۡنَا مَهۡلِكَ أَهۡلِهِۦ وَإِنَّا لَصَٰدِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not

وَمَكَرُواْ مَكۡرٗا وَمَكَرۡنَا مَكۡرٗا وَهُمۡ لَا

perceive it. (50)

يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, (51)

فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ مَكْرِهِمْ أَنَّا دَمَّرْنَٰهُمْ وَقَوْمَهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing. In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge. (52)

فَتِلْكَ بُيُوتُهُمْ خَاوِيَةًۢ بِمَا ظَلَمُوٓا۟ ۗ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing. (53)

وَأَنجَيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَكَانُوا۟ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Overview

In the majority of cases when an account of the history of the Prophet Şāliĥ and the Thamūd is given, it constitutes part of a series of histories involving the Prophets Noah, Had, Lot and Shu`ayb. Sometimes we also have an account of Abraham. In this *sūrah,* particular emphasis is given to prophets sent to the Children of Israel: Moses, David and Solomon. We have no account of Hūd, Shu`ayb or Abraham.

In the present account of Şāliĥ we have no mention of the she- camel which was the miracle given to him. Instead, we are given the episode involving nine wicked people who plotted to assassinate him and his household. They conspired against him when he was totally unaware, but God foiled their scheming, destroyed them and their community, leaving the homes of the wrongdoers empty to serve as a lesson to following generations. He saved those who believed and led God-fearing lives. The idolaters in Makkah often passed by the destroyed dwellings of the Thamūd, yet still they did not take heed.

Precipitating Evil

"To *the Thamūd We sent their brother, Şāliĥ, and he said: "Worship God alone', but they split into two contending factions."* (Verse 45) In this verse the whole message Şāliĥ conveyed to his people is summed up in one point, *"worship God alone,'* which is the basis of the divine message to mankind throughout all generations, and with all prophets and messengers. Although everything around man in the universe and

within man himself urges belief in this fundamental truth, humanity lived for countless generations denying or deriding this basic and simple fact. It continues to deliberately evade it today, taking divergent routes that lead it away from the right and straight path.

The *sūrah* mentions the attitude of Şāliĥ's people after he had endeavoured to persuade them to believe, but they split into two factions: one that responded to him and the other who opposed him. The latter formed the majority, as we are told elsewhere in the Qur'ān.

We then have a gap in the story, which is common in Qur'ānic narration, and we sense that those who denied Şāliĥ's message tried to hasten God's punishment against which he had warned them, rather than praying for God's guidance and mercy. In this they were the same as the Quraysh who also precipitated God's punishment. Şāliĥ criticized their attitude and tried to direct them to seek God's forgiveness, so that they might receive His mercy: *"Said [Şāliĥ]: My people, why do you seek to hasten evil instead of hoping for the good? Why do you not seek God's forgiveness, so that you may be graced with His mercy?"* (Verse 46)

The hearts of unbelievers can reach such a level of corruption that they appeal to God, saying: *"God, if this be indeed Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from the skies, or inflict grievous suffering on us."* (8: 32) They say this rather than praying to God to guide them to believe in the truth He has revealed. While this verse refers to what the Quraysh said, Şāliĥ's people said something similar, rejecting their prophet's appeals that they should repent, seek God's forgiveness and pray for His mercy. They even justified their irritation with him and his followers by saying that they constituted a bad omen and that they expected evil to befall them as a result of their presence: *"They answered: We augur evil from you and those that follow you."* (Verse 47)

The Arabic text uses the verb *iţţyrnā,* rendered here as *'we augur evil'*. It refers to the different superstitious habits of ignorant people who refuse to accept the clarity of faith. In Arabia a person who was about to take a serious decision would scare a bird. If the bird flew towards the right rather than the left, the man felt optimistic about his decision and went ahead with it. If the bird flew to the left, the man would be gloomy, expecting evil. Needless to say, birds know nothing of the world that lies beyond our perception. Their spontaneous flight cannot tell us anything about the unknown. But it is ingrained within human nature that it cannot live without something unknown to which it attributes what lies beyond its knowledge and ability. When it does not attribute this, through faith, to God who knows all that lies beyond the reach of any creature's perception, it attributes it to legend and superstition that know no limit and follow no logic.

Many are those who deny God, and refuse to attribute to Him what lies beyond human perception, describing it as religious fallacy, while claiming for themselves a superior standard of knowledge. At the same time they attach much importance to the number 13, or to a black cat crossing their path, or to lighting two cigarettes with one match, or other such superstitious notions. This is indicative of the way people resist human nature and its need for faith. Indeed human nature cannot dispense with faith in its attempt to explain many universal phenomena which human knowledge has not yet fathomed. Indeed some of these will always remain beyond the reach of human knowledge, because they exceed human ability which is given to man in accordance with what he needs for the fulfilment of his task of building life on earth.

When Şāliĥ's people stated their stupid excuse, one which betrayed their superstitious confusion, Şāliĥ put the truth clearly before their eyes: *"Said he: The evil you augur can come only from God."* (Verse 47) Everything that relates to your fortunes, future and destiny lies with God. He has set certain rules, commanded people to comply with His laws, and set clear before them the way to ensure their happiness. Whoever follows divine guidance will have its good results, without any need to scare a bird in order to decide what path to follow. Those who deviate from His guidance will reap evil results, even though their scared birds may reassure them by the direction of their flight.

"You are indeed people undergoing a test." (Verse 47) You are certainly being tested with whatever happens to you, good or bad, and with God's bounty that is given to you. Therefore, to stay alert, study events and recognize that they are part of the trial that will ensure good results which can never be achieved through pursuing omens.

True faith makes people evaluate things properly, motivates them to reflect on what takes place all around them. It makes them realize that it all happens by God's will, while nothing is the result of blind coincidence. Thus, life increases in value and people attain a higher spiritual standard. Man makes his journey through life on this planet without any isolation from the universe around him, or its Creator who conducts its affairs, or the laws of nature operated by God to ensure the continuity of the universe.

This sound approach is, however, accepted only by sound hearts which have not been twisted by irrevocable deviation from the truth.

Among Şāliĥ's people there were nine leaders who were irreconcilable in their opposition to his call. Hence, they plotted against him and his family:

> *There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good. They said: 'Let us swear a mutual oath by God that we shall suddenly kill him*

and his household by night; and then we shall boldly say to his next of kin, "We did not witness the destruction of his household; and we are indeed telling the truth." (Verses 48-49)

These nine people had left no room in their hearts for the truth and its message. They were determined to bring matters to a head after they found Şāliĥ's argument overpowering. Hence they devised a plot. Most singularly, they agreed under oath by God to kill Şāliĥ and his family under the cover of darkness. All this when he asked nothing other than that they believe in God and worship Him alone. It is also singular that they should not only swear to kill him and his family, but that they were also intent on denying any knowledge of the crime. *"We are indeed telling the truth."* They would kill them in darkness, and as such they would not see the killing and hence would not be witnesses to it.

What a stupid, shallow trick! Yet they used it to reassure themselves and justify their lies. It is certainly singular that such people were so keen to sound truthful given the circumstances. When it is blinded to God's guidance which shows the straight path, human nature betrays countless such twists and deviations.

So they schemed and plotted, but God was watching them, aware of their scheming: *"They devised a scheme; but We also devised a scheme, while they could not perceive it."* (Verse 50) The gap between the two schemes, and the two powers behind them is too far to bridge. Yet often are those who have power deceived by their resources, oblivious to the watching eye that never sleeps. They do not reckon with God's power as it takes them suddenly and from where they do not expect: *"Behold what all their scheming came to in the end: We destroyed them utterly, together with all their people, and their dwellings are now empty, ruined, because of their wrongdoing."* (Verses 51-52)

It is only a brief moment yet destruction engulfs them, leaving their homes empty with no soul surviving. A moment earlier they had been scheming their evil plot. The *sūrah* deliberately portrays the two scenes in quick succession, in order to highlight the devastating element that takes unawares those plotters who are deceived by their power, thinking their scheme perfectly worked out.

"In this there is a clear sign for people of knowledge." (Verse 52) The *sūrah* as a whole and its comments on the stories it relates repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge.

Following this image of surprise punishment, the *sūrah* then mentions that those believers who were conscious of God and feared Him were saved: *"And we saved the people who believed and were God-fearing."* (Verse 53) A person who fears God is spared other fears.

It is clearly stated in a sacred *ĥadīth* that "God will not allow two types of fear to afflict a believer.' Thus, a believer who truly fears God will fear no one else.

5
Perversion Leading to Ruin

And Lot said to his people: ‘Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? (54)

وَلُوطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِۦٓ أَتَأْتُونَ
ٱلْفَٰحِشَةَ وَأَنتُمْ تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people.’ (55)

أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّن دُونِ
ٱلنِّسَآءِ ۚ بَلْ أَنتُمْ قَوْمٌ تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

His people’s only answer was: “Expel Lot’s people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure.’ (56)

۞ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن
قَالُوٓا۟ أَخْرِجُوٓا۟ ءَالَ لُوطٍ مِّن قَرْيَتِكُمْ ۖ
إِنَّهُمْ أُنَاسٌ يَتَطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. (57)

فَأَنجَيْنَٰهُ وَأَهْلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱمْرَأَتَهُۥ قَدَّرْنَٰهَا مِنَ
ٱلْغَٰبِرِينَ ﴿٥٧﴾

And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned. (58)

وَأَمْطَرْنَا عَلَيْهِم مَّطَرًا ۖ فَسَآءَ مَطَرُ
ٱلْمُنذَرِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

Persecuting Purity

What we have here is a summarized version of Lot’s history and the decision taken by his people to drive him out of their town because he denounced their perverted sexual practices. By so indulging unashamedly in homosexuality, they perverted human nature which God had installed in all human beings, and indeed in living species generally.

This was a strange phenomenon in the history of human communities. Perversion can occur with individuals, as a result of psychological disorders or temporary circumstances, leading men to have sex with other men. This happens mostly in army barracks where women are not allowed, or in prisons where inmates are held for long periods of time, having to cope with sexual desires without contact with women. But for such practices to be widespread, becoming the norm in a whole town, and despite the presence of women and marriage possibilities, it is most peculiar indeed.

God has made human nature such that the two sexes are attracted to each other, because life in general is based on marriage. He says in the Qur'ān: *"Limitless in His glory is He who has created all the pairs out of whatever the earth produces, and out of people's own selves, and out of that which they have no knowledge."* (36: 36) Thus all living species, plant, animal, human and other creatures unknown to man, are created in pairs. Such duality seems fundamental in the make up of the entire universe, let alone living species. The atom itself, which until now seems to be the basic unit of all creatures, has protons and electrons, which are positive and negative charges.

The reality is that the survival of all living things is based on the mating between two opposites. Even species that do not have males and females combine their male and female cells in the same unit, reproducing by a function that brings both together.

Since mating is basic for reproduction, God has made mutual attraction between the opposite sexes part of the essence of nature, which needs no acquisition or development through education or thought: it is pure instinct. This ensures that life continues naturally, because those who are alive find their pleasure in the fulfilment of their nature. Thus the divine will accomplishes its design through the natural satisfaction of creatures' instinctive desires. God made male and female genitals, and instilled mutual attraction between the two sexes, so that they find their natural pleasure in being together. He made no such possibility in two males coming together. Hence it is most odd that the natural inclinations of a whole community should become so perverted and without any compelling need pushing people to do what is contrary to their natural inclinations, as was the case with Lot's people.

Lot publicly denounced his people's practices stating that these were depraved: *"And Lot said to his people: Would you commit this abomination with your eyes open? Would you approach men with lust rather than women? You are a grossly ignorant people."* (Verses 54-55)

His first sentence wonders at their abominable practice when they actually saw that life, in all shapes, forms and species, follows its natural course, while they were the ones behaving oddly. In his second sentence he makes clear what type of

abomination they practised. It is enough to state what they did so as to highlight its perversion and conflict with nature. Lot then describes them as grossly ignorant, using the word in both its senses: lacking knowledge and being foolish. A person who does not know what human nature is like is devoid of all knowledge, and one who deliberately departs from human nature is a stupid fool who transgresses against all that is right.

What was Lot's people's reply to his denunciation of their wrongdoing and his urging them to revert to natural practices? In a nutshell, they planned to drive him, and those who followed him, away, for no reason other than that they maintained their purity: *"His people's only answer was: 'Expel Lot's people from your city! They are folk who keep themselves pure."* (Verse 56)

Their statement ridiculed anyone who sought to keep himself pure of such abominable practice. It also objected to his disapproval of their practice. They were so deep in their deviation that they could not realize how filthy their practice was. Their reply also indicated their opposition to the very idea of keeping themselves pure, because that would make them refrain from such perversion. Whatever they meant, they had nonetheless made up their minds to remove Lot from the picture. God, however, wanted something different to happen:

> *So We saved him with his household, except for his wife, whom We destined to be among those who stayed behind. And We rained on the others a rain of destruction. Dire indeed is such rain which fell on those who were forewarned.* (Verses 57-58)

The *sūrah* does not provide any detail of this destructive rain, as occurs in other *sūrahs.* Hence, we do not need to discuss it here. We will only mention that they were destroyed with a rain, when rain normally brings life. This fits with the fact that they used semen in a way that is contrary to what it is meant for, which is to ensure the continuity of life and growth. God certainly knows better what He means by His words, and what to accomplish by His natural laws.

6
Of God’s Own Making

Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him? (59)

قُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَسَلَـٰمٌ عَلَىٰ عِبَادِهِ ٱلَّذِينَ
ٱصْطَفَىٰٓ ۗ ءَآللَّهُ خَيْرٌ أَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice. (60)

أَمَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَأَنزَلَ
لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَنۢبَتْنَا بِهِۦ
حَدَآئِقَ ذَاتَ بَهْجَةٍ مَّا كَانَ لَكُمْ
أَن تُنۢبِتُوا۟ شَجَرَهَآ ۗ أَءِلَـٰهٌ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ
قَوْمٌ يَعْدِلُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there he any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge. (61)

أَمَّن جَعَلَ ٱلْأَرْضَ قَرَارًا وَجَعَلَ خِلَـٰلَهَآ
أَنْهَـٰرًا وَجَعَلَ لَهَا رَوَٰسِىَ وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَ
ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ حَاجِزًا ۗ أَءِلَـٰهٌ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ بَلْ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect! (62)

أَمَّن يُجِيبُ ٱلْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكْشِفُ
ٱلسُّوٓءَ وَيَجْعَلُكُمْ خُلَفَآءَ ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ أَءِلَـٰهٌ
مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

أَمَّن يَهْدِيكُمْ فِي ظُلُمَٰتِ ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ
وَمَن يُرْسِلُ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ بُشْرًۢا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ
رَحْمَتِهِۦٓ ۗ أَءِلَٰهٌ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ تَعَٰلَى ٱللَّهُ عَمَّا
يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him. (63)

أَمَّن يَبْدَؤُا۟ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ وَمَن يَرْزُقُكُم
مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ أَءِلَٰهٌ مَّعَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُلْ
هَاتُوا۟ بُرْهَٰنَكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ
﴿٦٤﴾

Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God?' Say: "Produce your proof, if you are truthful.'(64)

قُل لَّا يَعْلَمُ مَن فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
ٱلْغَيْبَ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ أَيَّانَ
يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

Say: "None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' (65)

بَلِ ٱدَّٰرَكَ عِلْمُهُمْ فِي ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ فِي
شَكٍّ مِّنْهَا ۖ بَلْ هُم مِّنْهَا عَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. (66)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ أَءِذَا كُنَّا تُرَٰبًا وَءَابَآؤُنَآ
أَئِنَّا لَمُخْرَجُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

The unbelievers say: "What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life)? (67)

لَقَدْ وُعِدْنَا هَٰذَا نَحْنُ وَءَابَآؤُنَا مِن قَبْلُ
إِنْ هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients.' (68)

قُلْ سِيرُوا۟ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty.' (69)

وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا تَكُن فِي ضَيْقٍ مِّمَّا

Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. (70)

They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (71)

Say: "It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you.' (72)

Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. (73)

And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. (74)

There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book. (75)

This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. (76)

And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. (77)

Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. (78)

So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. (79)

يَمۡكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَـٰذَا ٱلۡوَعۡدُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَـٰدِقِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

قُلۡ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ رَدِفَ لَكُم بَعۡضُ ٱلَّذِى تَسۡتَعۡجِلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو فَضۡلٍ عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَـٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَهُمۡ لَا يَشۡكُرُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

وَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَيَعۡلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمۡ وَمَا يُعۡلِنُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَمَا مِنۡ غَآئِبَةٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا فِى كِتَـٰبٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٧٥﴾

إِنَّ هَـٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ يَقُصُّ عَلَىٰ بَنِىٓ إِسۡرَٰٓءِيلَ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلَّذِى هُمۡ فِيهِ يَخۡتَلِفُونَ ﴿٧٦﴾

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَهُدًى وَرَحۡمَةٌ لِّلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقۡضِى بَيۡنَهُم بِحُكۡمِهِۦ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ﴿٧٨﴾

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (80)

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (81)

When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. (82)

On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. (83)

And when they come forth [God] will say: 'Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' (84)

And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. (85)

Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. (86)

فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّكَ عَلَى ٱلْحَقِّ
ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾

إِنَّكَ لَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰ وَلَا تُسْمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ
ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا وَلَّوْا۟ مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَمَآ أَنتَ بِهَٰدِى ٱلْعُمْىِ عَن ضَلَٰلَتِهِمْ ۖ إِن
تُسْمِعُ إِلَّا مَن يُؤْمِنُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَهُم
مُّسْلِمُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

۞ وَإِذَا وَقَعَ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ أَخْرَجْنَا لَهُمْ
دَآبَّةً مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ تُكَلِّمُهُمْ أَنَّ ٱلنَّاسَ
كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا لَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشُرُ مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ فَوْجًا مِّمَّن
يُكَذِّبُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَآءُو قَالَ أَكَذَّبْتُم بِـَٔايَٰتِى
وَلَمْ تُحِيطُوا۟ بِهَا عِلْمًا أَمَّاذَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ
﴿٨٤﴾

وَوَقَعَ ٱلْقَوْلُ عَلَيْهِم بِمَا ظَلَمُوا۟ فَهُمْ لَا
يَنطِقُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

أَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا ٱلَّيْلَ لِيَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ

وَٱلنَّهَارَ مُبۡصِرًاۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ
لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٨٦

وَيَوۡمَ يُنفَخُ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَفَزِعَ مَن فِي
ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَن فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ إِلَّا مَن شَآءَ
ٱللَّهُۚ وَكُلٌّ أَتَوۡهُ دَٰخِرِينَ ٨٧

On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. (87)

وَتَرَى ٱلۡجِبَالَ تَحۡسَبُهَا جَامِدَةٗ وَهِيَ تَمُرُّ
مَرَّ ٱلسَّحَابِۚ صُنۡعَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَتۡقَنَ كُلَّ
شَيۡءٍۚ إِنَّهُۥ خَبِيرُۢ بِمَا تَفۡعَلُونَ ٨٨

And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. (88)

مَن جَآءَ بِٱلۡحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُۥ خَيۡرٞ مِّنۡهَا وَهُم مِّن
فَزَعٖ يَوۡمَئِذٍ ءَامِنُونَ ٨٩

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. (89)

وَمَن جَآءَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ فَكُبَّتۡ وُجُوهُهُمۡ فِي
ٱلنَّارِ هَلۡ تُجۡزَوۡنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ
٩٠

And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: "Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?' (90)

إِنَّمَآ أُمِرۡتُ أَنۡ أَعۡبُدَ رَبَّ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡبَلۡدَةِ
ٱلَّذِي حَرَّمَهَا وَلَهُۥ كُلُّ شَيۡءٖۖ وَأُمِرۡتُ
أَنۡ أَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ ٩١

[Say]: 'I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. (91)

وَأَنۡ أَتۡلُوَاْ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَۖ فَمَنِ ٱهۡتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا
يَهۡتَدِي لِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَقُلۡ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠

And to recite the Qur'ān.' So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner.' (92)

And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is

never heedless of what you do.' (93)	مِنَ ٱلْمُنذِرِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾ وَقُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ سَيُرِيكُمْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ فَتَعْرِفُونَهَا ۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَـٰفِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

Overview

Following closely after those episodes of the histories of Moses, David, Solomon, Ṣāliĥ and Lot (peace be upon them all), this final passage is closely related to its opening verses. As clearly seen, the stories that occur in between the opening and concluding passages are also closely related to both. Every story serves an aspect of the overall issue that the *sūrah* tackles. This final passage begins with praising God and offers the greeting of peace to His chosen prophets and messengers who include in their ranks many that have not been mentioned in this *sūrah.* Thus, the passage begins a new discussion of faith. This round portrays scenes of the universe and shows aspects of the inner self, and things that are beyond our world. It also refers to the signs that announce the approach of the Last Hour, and shows scenes of the hereafter and the hardship people experience on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed, apart from those excepted by God, all creatures in the heavens and the earth dread the arrival of the Last Hour.

In this passage people are made to contemplate what they see in the universe around them, and also what is within themselves. They cannot deny these and cannot explain their existence unless they acknowledge God as the sole Creator who has planned it all and who is able to accomplish His purpose in full. These scenes are shown in succession, with a perfect rhythm, rendering all counter argument futile. Successive questions are put to them: who has created the heavens and the earth? Who brought rain from the skies to bring forth pleasant gardens? Who has stabilized the earth, caused rivers to run through it, placed mountains on it and a barrier between seas? Who responds to a supplicant praying in desperation and removes harm? Who causes human succession on earth? Who guides you in the darkness on land and at sea? Who sends the wind heralding His grace? Who originates and repeats creation? Who provides sustenance for you from the heavens and the earth? Time after time they are hammered with the question: can there be another deity alongside God? They cannot utter such a claim, yet they worship objects claiming for them a share of God's divinity!

The passage then looks at their denial of and confusion about the hereafter. It comments by directing them to reflect on the end met by earlier communities which,

like them, denied the truth. This is followed by a scene of the resurrection and what it involves of fear and hardship. It returns them for a moment to life on earth before resuming its account of the Day of Judgement, as if to shake their hearts and souls.

As the passage approaches its end it acquires an awesome rhythm. Having directed the unbelievers' attentions to scenes of the universe and the horror of the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet abandons them to their fate which they have chosen, defining his own code and method: *"I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this City who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit, and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner."* (Verses 91-92)

The passage and the round conclude in the same way they started: with praising God, the only One who is worthy of praise. The unbelievers are left to their Lord who is sure to show them His signs, and who is certainly aware of all they do in public and in private: *"And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."* (Verse 93)

Who Else?

> *Say: All praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen. Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?* (Verse 59)

In this verse God orders His Messenger (peace be upon him) to say the most suitable word with which to open and conclude his discourse preaching God's message. All praise be to God who deserves praise for all the blessings He has bestowed on His servants, not least guiding them to believe in Him and follow the system and code of living He has chosen for them. Thereafter, a greeting of peace is offered to His servants whom He has chosen to deliver His message and outline the system He wants implemented.

Following this opening, the *sūrah* highlights its effects on hearts that deny God's signs. It begins with a question that admits only one answer: *"Who is more worthy: God or the false [deities] they associate with Him?"* (Verse 59) These false deities may be statues and figures, angels *or jinn,* or some other created being. None of them, however, aspires to a position of being similar to God Almighty, let alone to being more worthy than He. No one endowed with a mind to think could ever draw such a comparison. Hence the question appears to ridicule their position, or rebuke them for what they say. It is not a question to be asked in earnest, nor does it require an answer.

Therefore, a different question is put to them, derived from the nature of the universe around them and what they see of it:

> *Or, who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow. Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, they are people who swerve from justice.* (Verse 60)

The heavens and the earth are undeniable facts, yet no one can claim that other deities have created them, when such deities are nothing but statues, angels, devils, stars or planets. Simple facts are enough to show the fallacy of such a claim. None of the idolaters in Arabia made the absurd claim that the universe came into existence by itself, without a creator, like latter day unbelievers do. Hence, it was sufficient to remind people of the existence of the heavens and earth, and to direct them to reflect on who had created them. This was sufficient to prove the case of faith and show unbelief as something truly absurd. This question, however, does remain valid. The creation of the heavens and earth in the way they are, with deliberate planning clearly evident, could never have come about by blind coincidence. Indeed, the perfect harmony apparent in the heavens and the earth forces any thinking person to acknowledge that it is all the work of the One and only God. Indeed, God's oneness is evident through His work: there is one harmonious design running throughout the universe, with a single nature and direction. Hence, it must have been made by the One originator whose aim is clear in everything He creates and designs.

"Or, who is it that... sends down for you water from the skies, with which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty? You could have never caused such trees to grow." (Verse 60) Rain is also a clear undeniable fact. One cannot be explained in any way other than acknowledging the Creator of the heavens and earth. He enables all in accordance with a system that permits the sending down of rain, in set quantities that allow for the emergence of life as it is. None of this could have come about by coincidence or accident. It is because of meeting such special needs that the Qur'ān uses the phrase *"sends down for you..."* The Qur'ān directs people's attentions to the fine effects of sending rain in suitable measure to meet their needs: *"With which We cause to grow gardens of delightful beauty."* (Verse 60)

Gardens warm hearts with endearing vigour and activity. To look at natural beauty is enough to bring hearts alive. To contemplate all the aspects of creation in gardens is sufficient to make a person glorify the Maker of such inimitable beauty. Indeed, even the best artists fall short of matching the colours of just a single flower. The use of shades of the same colours, the intricate lines and the arrangement of little petals within the same flower appears to be a miracle that defies the ingenuity of all

art. Add all this to the miracle of growth reflected in trees, and you have a secret the human mind cannot fathom: *"You could have never caused such trees to grow."* (Verse 60) For certain, the secret of life remains unknown to all humanity. Up to this moment in time, no one has been able to say how life started and how it was attached to plants, animals and people. To have a proper answer, we need to refer to some source beyond our visible world.

When the *sūrah* dwells on life growing in delightful gardens, and by means of this heightening interest and causing reflection, it surprises its listeners with the question: *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 60) No one can claim that there is. All have to admit the fact. Hence, their attitude of equating their alleged deities with God and worshipping them on an equal footing appears to be most unjust: *"Nay, they are people who swerve from justice."* (Verse 60)

The Arabic word *ya`dilūn* used in this verse to describe these people carries two meanings. The first means 'to equate', which renders the sentence as "Nay, they are people who equate,' meaning equating others in their worship with God. The other meaning is the one chosen in our translation, which is "*to swerve from justice."* Thus, by associating others with God in their worship they actually swerve from justice. This because God is the only One worthy of worship: He is the only Creator. Whichever meaning we choose, however, makes their action derisive.

The *sūrah* then highlights another universal truth, placing it to the forefront of their vision:

> *Or, who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst, and has set upon it firm mountains, and has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water? Could there be any deity alongside God? Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge.* (Verse 61)

The preceding verse spoke about the fact of the heavens and earth's creation. This verse refers to how the earth was made. God has made it stable, steady and solid so that it can support growing life. If the earth's position in relation to the sun and moon, or its shape, size, atmosphere, speed of rotation or orbital movement, or the speed of the moon as it circles it in orbit, or any other aspect which could not have come about by coincidence, were different to what it actually is, the earth would not sustain life.

Those unbelievers who were first addressed by the Qur'ān could not understand the meaning of *"who is it that made the earth a stable abode"*. But they realized that it was, overall, a very suitable abode for the emergence and continuity of life. They could not claim that any of their alleged deities had a part in the earth's creation. This is sufficient for them. Thereafter, the question remains open for future generations

who, with increased knowledge, would be better able to appreciate its great significance. This is an aspect of the Qur'ānic miracle as it addresses all standards of intellect, generation after generation.

"Or, *who is it that made the earth a stable abode and caused rivers to run in its midst."* (Verse 61) In relation to the earth, rivers are the veins that carry the fluid of life. They are everywhere, running north and south, east and west, bringing fertility and growth. Rivers are the result of rain water gathering and running according to local geography. The Creator of the universe is the One who has determined the formation of clouds, rain and rivers. No one can say that anyone other than this single Creator has taken part in forming the universe. Running rivers are a phenomenon seen by the unbelievers themselves. So who has made them? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"*

"And has set upon it firm mountains." (Verse 61) The mountains are placed firmly in their positions. They are often the starting points of rivers, as rain water runs from them at high speed to the valleys below so as to form the riverbeds in which water flows. Thus the firm mountains provide contrast with the running water in this panoramic scene. Contrasting images are often employed in the Qur'ān.

"And has placed a barrier between the two great bodies of water?" (Verse 61) These two bodies of water are the salty seas and the rivers carrying sweet water. Both have water as their main material. The barrier between them is a natural one which prevents the sea from overpowering the river and spoiling its water. The level of water in rivers is higher than sea level, and this causes the barrier between them despite the fact that many rivers wind their way to the sea. Nevertheless, the riverbed remains unaffected by the sea. Even when a river's water level drops below sea level, the barrier remains effective, due to the different degrees of viscosity of the two waters. River water is lighter than sea water, which helps to keep them separate. This is one aspect of God's elaborate design in creating the universe.[7]

Who has done all this? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* When we look at the unity of design we cannot but acknowledge the unity of the Creator. *"Nay, most of them are devoid of knowledge."* (Verse 61) Knowledge is mentioned here because this universal fact needs knowledge to be properly contemplated and for its meticulous aspects to be made clearly apparent to all. Moreover, knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah,* as we have already explained.

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[7] Scientific discovery confirms that when straits connect two contiguous seas their waters are separated by an invisible barrier, each containing different marine life. The Qur'ānic statement also applies to such situations. In the Arabic text, the word used for 'body of water' is *baĥr,* which means sea, but it is used in the dual form to mean a sea and a river, or two seas. — Editor's note.

Who Takes Care of Man?

Next, the *sūrah* tells them about themselves:

> *Or, who is it that responds to the one in distress when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and makes you inherit the earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Little do they reflect!* (Verse 62)

As it tells them about their inner thoughts and real position, this verse speaks to peoples' consciences. When a person finds himself in real distress, expecting little help from anywhere, he resorts to none other than God to remove his distress. This is especially so when the distress is too much to cope with; when the help one had been expecting from friends and relatives fails to materialize; when one looks around only to find oneself in a hopeless situation with no means of escape; when no power, not even one's own, is able to do much to relieve one's distress; when whatever one has prepared for hard times proves useless. In such a situation human nature wakes up and appeals to the only power that can provide help and support. Man then appeals to God, even though he had forgotten Him in times of ease and plenty.

It is only God, and none other, who responds to a person in distress and removes ill and hardship. It is God who restores security to such a person and removes all that has been afflicting him.

In times of ease and plenty people are oblivious of this fact. They try to find support and protection with some worldly power, flimsy as such may be. Yet when distress and hardship are too strong, their nature regains insight and they turn back to their Lord, seeking His forgiveness and support.

The Qur'ān directs stubborn opponents of faith to this fact that lies in their nature. It incorporates this with the indisputable facts of the universe, such as the creation of the heavens and earth, rain, plant growth, man's firm abode on earth, the mountains, rivers and the barrier between river and sea water. That a person in distress appeals to God for help is also a fact of life which is no less true than any of these.

The *sūrah* continues to direct their feelings to realities in their life: *"And makes you inherit the earth?" Who* is it that allows people to take charge of the earth? It is God who initially placed mankind in charge of the earth, and then made them succeed one another, generation after generation. It is He who created them in accordance with laws of nature that allow their existence on earth, and granted them talents and abilities that prepare them for their great task of building life on earth. These laws make the earth what it is, providing them with a suitable abode, and produce harmony and complementarity in the whole universe so as to provide and maintain the balance that promotes life and ensures its continuity. Should any of the many

existing conditions be disturbed, life on earth becomes impossible.[8]

Besides, it is God who has determined life and death, to allow one generation to succeed another. Had earlier generations continued to live, the earth would be too small for them and their descendants. Life, civilization and thought would have become stale and slow, as the succession of generations promotes new thinking and experimenting. Had too many generations been allowed to live together, conflict and dispute would have increased exponentially.

All these are facts we find within the human soul, in the same way as the facts mentioned earlier exist in the universe. Who brought about their existence? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 62) They certainly forget or choose to be oblivious. *"Little do they reflect."* (Verse 62) Had man reflected on such facts, he would maintain his bond with God as it was originally. He would not have been oblivious of it, and he would never have associated partners with God.

The *sūrah* then refers to other indisputable facts that represent human life and activity on this planet:

> *Or, who is it that guides you in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea, and sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace? Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him.* (Verse 63)

People, including the first community to be addressed by the Qur'ān, move along beaten tracks when they travel on land or by sea, and they try to discover the secrets of land and sea through experimentation. They are guided to their goals, but who guides them? Who has placed in them the powers of understanding and recognition? Who has enabled them to be guided by stars, other devices and landmarks? Who has established a link between their own nature and that of the universe, and between their powers and its secrets? Who has given their ears the ability to catch and recognize sound; and their eyes to receive light; their senses to perceive sensations? Who has given them the intelligent faculty we call "mind' in order to benefit by what it receives, and to gather and build upon experience? *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 63)

"And who sends forth the winds as heralds of His forthcoming grace?" (Verse 63) Whatever may be said about the formation and causes of wind from scientific, atmospheric or geographical points of view, they remain part of the overall design of the universe. It is this design that allows the wind to travel, driving clouds from one place to another, promising rain which symbolizes God's grace as it supports life.

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[8] For further explanation, please refer to the commentary on verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25 in Vol. XII.

Who has made the world such that the winds bring tidings of forthcoming grace? *"Could there be any deity alongside God? Sublimely exalted is God above anything they associate with Him."* (Verse 63)

Origination and Resurrection

These verses containing such powerful questioning conclude with a question about their own creation, resurrection and the provisions they receive from heaven. This is all coupled with a challenge that cannot be met:

> *Or, who is it that creates all life in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: Produce your proof, if you are truthful.'* (Verse 64)

To initiate creation is an indisputable fact, and no one can explain it in any way other than saying that it is the work of the One Creator. His existence must be acknowledged because of the existence of the universe. Every attempt to explain the existence of the universe in such an evidently planned and deliberate state without acknowledging God's existence and oneness has proven logically unsustainable. Indeed, His own creation proves His oneness. It tells of one system of creation, planning, absolute balance and harmony, which means that it is all subject to a single will that established a single sophisticated rule of existence.

It is the bringing back of creation that unbelievers have always disputed. Yet the acknowledgement of initial creation in such a planned and elaborate way inevitably leads to belief in a second creation so as to give people what they deserve for their actions which they do in this temporary stage of life. Although some reward for action is given in this life, it is by no means complete. The point is that we have clear balance and harmony in the elaborate creation of the universe. This necessitates its perfection through the achievement of balance and harmony between action and reward, which does not happen in life on earth. Therefore, it must take place in a second life. As to why such balance and reward are not accomplished in this life, we can only say that it is the prerogative of the Creator and His wisdom. We must not put such a question to Him, because He knows His creation best. He has chosen not to reveal the reason to us, keeping it as part of His own knowledge which He reveals to no one.

With the acknowledgement of God as the originator of creation and the One who brings the dead back to life, the *sūrah* asks the same question again: *"Could there be any deity alongside God?"* (Verse 64)

Providing sustenance is closely related to our first and second creation. Sustenance

comes from the earth in a variety of ways, the most evident of which are plants, animals, water and air, all of which enable us to eat, drink and breathe. It also includes minerals that we take from the earth, sea treasures that provide food and adornment, different types of energy such as electricity and magnetism, as well as other powers known only to God. We are able to discover some of these and tap them every now and then.

Sustenance that comes from the heavens is also plentiful. In this life we get light, heat and rain as well as whatever powers and benefits God grants us. In the life to come, we receive the reward God will be pleased to give us. This is implied in the figurative sense of "heaven" connoting elevation, which is often used in the Qur'ān and *ĥadīth.*

The provision of sustenance out of heaven and earth is mentioned after the initiation and resurrection of creation because both types of sustenance are closely related to the two cycles of creation. In the first stage of creation people live on the food and sustenance they get out of the earth. The way they deal with such sustenance in this life is an important factor in determining their reward in the hereafter. The same applies to sustenance provided from heaven: it is to sustain life initially and to provide reward ultimately. Here again we see an example of the accuracy and harmony in the Qur'ānic style.

Creation and resurrection are facts, as is sustenance provided out of the heavens and earth, but unbelievers are often oblivious to these facts. Hence the *sūrah* throws out a forceful challenge to them: *"Could there be any deity alongside God? Say: 'Produce your proof, if are truthful."* (Verse 64)

They will have no proof, and no one who tries to find proof will ever be successful. Such is the Qur'ānic method of argument about faith: it uses scenes from the universe around us and facts that we know within our own constitution, making them a framework for its powerful logic. It thus revives human nature so that it looks at facts in a simple and correct way. It addresses the human conscience through the facts it knows but has overlooked for long. In this simple and logical way, the Qur'ān establishes the profound indisputable truths we know in the universe and within ourselves. It leaves no room for dialectic reasoning that we have inherited from Greek sophistry, and which found its way into what is known in Islamic scholarship as the *Kalām* discipline, or theology.

Blind to the Truth

Having taken us on this round of universal imagery and facts about our lives to establish the truth of God's oneness and the falsehood of polytheism, the *sūrah* begins a new passage citing aspects of what lies beyond the reach of human

perception, known only to God. These verses discuss the life to come, which human nature and logic accept as essential, but the timing of which our knowledge cannot determine:

> *Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it. The unbelievers say: 'What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]? We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients. 'Say: "Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty. 'Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme. They ask: "When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you.' Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful. And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open. There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book.* (Verses 65-75)

Belief in resurrection, reckoning and reward is an integral and indispensable element of faith. There must be a future world when reward is completed so as to make it fit the action performed. It is necessary that man's heart and mind are focused on such future life, so as to make his actions in this world look to what awaits him there.

Over countless generations and despite successive divine messages humanity has taken a singularly bizarre attitude towards the question of resurrection and the life to come, despite its being both simple and necessary. It always stood incredulous when a messenger of God said that there would be life after death. The great miracle of initiating life in the first place was not enough to make humanity realize that a second life is easier to accomplish. Hence, people often turned away from every signal warning them of what awaits them in the life to come. They were bent on following their erring ways, disbelieving in God's messages and rejecting His messengers.

The life to come is part of the realm that lies beyond our faculties of perception and which is known only to God. Yet unbelievers always demanded to know the exact timing of this future life, or else they would continue to deny it. They treated it as superstition and legend that has no place in reality. Therefore the *sūrah* makes clear that it is God alone who knows the world beyond, and that human knowledge of the hereafter is very limited: *"Say: 'None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God. Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead.' Indeed the*

total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter. Nay, they are in doubt of it. Nay, they are blind to it." (Verses 65-66)

Ever since the beginning of human life, man has been unable to see anything of the world beyond his perceptive faculties except what God, who knows all, has chosen to reveal to him. This has always worked for man's benefit. Had God known that revealing such knowledge would be good for man, He would have satisfied his curiosity and revealed it to him.

God has given man a host of abilities, talents, powers and potentials that enable him to fulfil the task assigned to him on earth, but no more. To lift the thick curtains that hide what lies beyond the reach of human perception would not help man in his task. Indeed keeping it unknown increases man's search for knowledge, which then opens up new vistas for him providing him with hidden treasures. Man's quest for knowledge enables him to discover more of the world's secrets and powers which he can then use to improve the quality of life on earth. He can use its materials and products, modify his practices and elevate his life, and by so doing fulfil his role of building human life on earth.

It is not only man who has been denied access to God's knowledge. All creatures that live anywhere in the universe, including the angels and the *jinn,* are assigned missions and tasks that do not require knowledge of what God has kept secret. Therefore: *"Say: None in the heavens or earth knows what is hidden except God."* (Verse 65) This is a definitive statement which leaves no room for anyone to make false claims. Yet this statement speaks about *"hat is hidden"* in general. Therefore, it is followed by a more specific statement concerning the life to come because, next to God's oneness, it represents the second most important issue of contention with the idolaters: *"Nor can they ever perceive when they shall be raised from the dead."* (Verse 65)

This is a negation of any knowledge of the timing of resurrection, even in the most undefined form of knowledge, which is perception. It is not only that they lack any definite knowledge of when resurrection will take place; they cannot perceive it as it approaches. Such knowledge is part of what is hidden, which none in the heavens or earth knows anything about.

This point is then left aside, so as to speak about their attitude to the hereafter and knowledge of it: *"Indeed the total sum of their knowledge stops short of comprehending the hereafter."* (Verse 66) On this issue they have achieved all that they can aspire to, but remain unable to fathom it. *"Nay, they are in doubt of it."* (Verse 66) They are uncertain whether it will ever come. How can they know its timing and expect its arrival? *"Nay, they are blind to it."* (Verse 66) In as far as the hereafter is concerned, they are totally blind, unable to see or comprehend anything. This last statement depicts them in a worse situation with regard to the hereafter than the two earlier ones.

After Being Reduced to Ashes

"The unbelievers say: What! After we have become dust, we and our forefathers, shall we be brought back [to life]?" (Verse 67) This has always been the most difficult point for unbelievers to accept. Could it be true that after life has departed from us, and our bodies have decomposed and been reduced to dust and ashes, which happens to all people within a certain period of their burial apart from some exceptional cases, we will be brought back to life? Is it true that we and our forefathers, who died long before us, will be raised up from the earth when we have become part of its dust?

This physical image acts as a barrier preventing them from accepting the possibility of future life. They forget that they have been brought into this life from nothing. No one knows where the atoms and cells that make up their bodies were initially. They were scattered on the earth, deep in the sea and high in the air. Some came from the soil, some from space and water, and some from the sun. Indeed, some were breathed in by man, plant or animal, and some came from a carcass that had decomposed allowing some of its elements to evaporate. These atoms and cells were then part of some food or drink, or part of the air people breathe, or the rays to which they are exposed. Then this countless multitude, from an unknown number of sources, was assembled in a fertilized egg that clings to the wall of a woman's uterus, and which then grows and acquires human form. After a long journey through life, it becomes no more than a dead body wrapped in sheets, ready for burial. Thus was their first creation. What is so strange about bringing them back in the same form, or in a different one, for their second life? But this was what those unbelievers of old used to say. It continues to be said today by some unbelievers, albeit somewhat differently.

The unbelievers followed this absurdity with ridicule: *"We have been promised this before, we and our forefathers! This is nothing but fables of the ancients."* (Verse 68) They were fully aware that earlier messengers had warned their forefathers in the past, which indicates that those Arabs were not totally unaware of faith. Rather, they thought that such promises had not been fulfilled. Therefore, they discarded the new promise, describing it as fables circulated among ancient people which Muhammad then revived. They forget that the Day of Judgement arrives at the time appointed for it, and it will neither be put forward because people hasten it, nor delayed to fulfil their hopes.

Its time has been set by God and remains known only to Him. When Gabriel asked the Prophet about its timing, he said: "The one being asked about it knows no more about it than the one putting the question." [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.]

At this point, the *sūrah* directs the unbelievers to turn their minds to the end met

by earlier communities which, like them, denied the warnings given by God's messengers. These are described here as the guilty ones: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see what happened in the end to the guilty."* (Verse 69) This directive is meant to broaden their view. No human generation stands in isolation. Every generation is subject to the same laws and rules that apply to the rest. What happened to those who were guilty in the past may happen to the guilty in later generations, because divine laws admit no favouritism. Travelling about the land was certain to inform them of past experiences, and these would contain a lesson for them. It would open their minds and hearts to light. The Qur'ān directs people to learn of the operation of divine laws so as to broaden their vision and give wider dimension to their lives.

Having given this directive to unbelievers, the *sūrah* spells out God's order to the Prophet to leave them to their destinies. He was not to feel distressed at what they might be scheming. They would not be able to cause him any harm. Nor was he to grieve for them, because he had already done his duty, delivering God's message and warning them against what fate awaits them: *"Do not grieve over them, nor be distressed by what they scheme."* (Verse 70) This verse tells us of the Prophet's compassion. He grieved over what could happen to his people, because he knew what had happened to earlier communities that rejected God's messages. The verse also tells us how wicked their scheming was against the Prophet, his message and followers.

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers said about resurrection and their refusal to take the warnings of God's impending punishment seriously: *"They ask: When will this promise be fulfilled, if what you say be true."* (Verse 71) They said this whenever they were reminded of what happened to earlier communities, even though they used to pass by where they lived, such as Lot's townships, the Thamūd's dwellings at al-Ĥijr, the `Ād's home at al-Aĥqāf, and the dwelling place of Sheba after it was destroyed by the floods. In ridicule they asked the Prophet when those warnings would come true? If you speak the truth, then let us have it now, or at least give us an exact timing for it.

In a short verse, the *sūrah* gives the impression of the forthcoming horror, imparting a touch of ridicule to their attitude: *"Say: It may well be that something of that which you so hastily demand has already drawn close to you."* (Verse 72) Thus the *sūrah* strikes fear in their hearts and makes them worry about the impending punishment. It could easily be very close, coming from behind, like a rider seeking another in fast pursuit. Yet they cannot perceive it. Thus, they are hastening it when it is already close to overtaking them. What a frightening surprise to fit their ridicule.

But who can tell? What God has kept for Himself will remain hidden behind a curtain that reveals nothing whatsoever. Something very serious, extremely terrible could be moments away. It is wise, then, to be warned and to be ready at all times to

what may lie behind those thick curtains.

"Your Lord is indeed most bountiful to people, but most of them are ungrateful." (Verse 73) Perhaps one of the most important aspects of God's bounty is that He allows people respite when they do wrong or fail to do what is required of them. He does not hasten His punishment, giving them chance after chance to reflect on their positions, repent of their mistakes, and turn back to the right path. Nevertheless, most of them are ungrateful for the grace God bestows on them. Rather, they ridicule the whole idea and hasten their own punishment, or continue in their erring ways, refusing to reflect and take heed. *"And indeed your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring into the open."* (Verse 74) He gives them this respite although He is fully aware of the feelings they harbour in their hearts as also what they declare by word and deed. This means that respite is given them in the full knowledge of their actions and feelings. Yet they will inevitably have to face the reckoning of all this.

This round concludes with a statement emphasizing God's perfect knowledge that overlooks nothing anywhere in the universe: *"There is nothing that is hidden in the heavens or the earth but is recorded in a clear book."* (Verse 75) Let imagination travel anywhere in the universe, thinking of any hidden thing: a secret, an object, a piece of news or information, force or power: it is all recorded and included in God's knowledge. Nothing is lost or overlooked. God's knowledge is emphasized throughout the *sūrah,* and the reference to it here is just one of many.

A Final Word on Israelite Differences

Having emphasized the point of God's perfect knowledge, the *sūrah* moves on to speak about the Children of Israel's differences on fundamental issues. What the Qur'ān states about these is part of God's knowledge, and it provides the final, indisputable word on them. It is an example of how God judges between people in dispute. This is stated so as to provide some comfort to the Prophet for he is instructed to leave them to God, who will judge between them as He pleases:

> *This Qur'ān explains to the Children of Israel most of that over which they disagree. And it is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe. Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing. So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth. Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God].* (Verses 76-81)

The Christians have long been in dispute concerning Jesus Christ and Mary, his mother. Some say that the Christ was purely human, while others maintain that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three different forms in which God reveals Himself to mankind. They allege that God is made of these three elements, making Jesus the Son. Thus, God the Father came down in the form of the Holy Spirit and took human form inside Mary and was born in the form of Jesus. Others still say that the Son is not eternal like the Father, but created in this world. As such, he is of a lower status than the Father and subject to Him. A different group deny that the Holy Spirit was one of the three elements. The Council of Nicaea held in 325 AD and the Council of Constantinople held in 381 decided that the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to the Father in divinity. It further decided that the Son was born from the Father in eternity and that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father. Likewise, the Council of Toledo, held in 589, also made the same decision concerning the Holy Spirit. The Eastern and Western Churches split over this point, and continue to differ. The Qur'ān gives the final word to end all such disputes. It describes the Christ as God's *"Word which He gave to Mary and a soul from Him."* (4: 171) He is certainly a human being, no more: *"He was nothing but a servant of Ours whom We had graced and whom We had made an example for the Children of Israel."* (43: 59)

Christians have held similar differences about the crucifixion. Some say that Jesus was crucified until death, was buried and then rose from the tomb after three days and was taken to heaven. Others say that Judas who betrayed him and pointed him out to his enemies was made to look like Jesus and that it was he who was crucified in his place. Some say that his likeness was thrown over his disciple Simon, and Simon was taken in his place. The Qur'ān gives the final word on all this as it says: *"They did not kill him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so."* (4: 157) *"God said: Jesus, I shall gather you and cause you to ascend to Me, and I shall cleanse you of those who disbelieve."* (3: 55)

In the past the Jews distorted the Torah and altered its divine laws. The Qur'ān confirms the original text God revealed: *"We decreed for them in it: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds."* (5: 45)

The Qur'ān tells them the truth about their history and their prophets, purging it of countless legends which they report in different ways. It cleanses this history from all the filth they tried to attribute to their prophets. In fact, we can hardly find an Israelite prophet left unstained by such filth. They alleged that Abraham introduced his wife to the King of Palestine and to the Pharaoh of Egypt as his sister, hoping for some favour from them. Jacob, or Israel, played tricks and lied to his father Isaac in order to take his grandfather's blessings, which were due to his brother Esau. They further alleged that the Prophet Lot's two daughters made him drunk on two nights

so that he slept with each one of them in order to beget a child. They did so, it is alleged, because he had no male heir and they feared that his wealth would go to others. It is further claimed that they achieved their purpose. They also alleged that David saw a pretty woman from the roof of his palace. When he knew that she was married to one of his soldiers, he sent this soldier on a mission from which he was sure not to return so that he could have his wife. Solomon is alleged to have worshipped a mule in order to please one of his women with whom he was so infatuated that he could not refuse her any request.

The Qur'ān absolves all these noble and pure prophets of all the filth such Israelite superstitions, which the Jews added to the Torah, tried to attach to them. Likewise it refuted all false claims against Jesus, son of Mary.

Guidance and Mercy

This Qur'ān which supersedes all books revealed before it provides the final word on all disputes between their followers. Still the idolaters in Arabia argued about it. It is as God describes it: *"It is indeed guidance and mercy to those who believe."* (Verse 77)

It is *"guidance"* preventing dispute and error. It outlines the way of life to implement, and determines the course to follow. It also provides a bond between the believers and the great laws of nature which never fail. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is *"mercy'* saving them from doubt, worry and confusion between systems and theories that cannot provide a solid basis to build their lives upon. Moreover, it establishes a bond with God that gives them reassurance and peace with themselves and with mankind generally. In this way, it leads them to earn God's pleasure and His magnificent reward.

The Qur'ānic method of remoulding hearts and souls in accordance with pure, undistorted nature is indeed unique. It establishes harmony between human life, the universe and the major laws of nature operating in it. This enables man to live in peace and reassurance because he realizes that he lives in a world whose laws and forces are at peace with him. He knows that the overall law that runs the universe is the same as that which controls his life. With such harmony and peace between man's soul and the great existence around him, peace is generated within the community and among humanity at large. Reassurance and stability become a reality in human life. This is *"mercy"* in its most comprehensive form. This quick reference to God's grace represented in the revelation of the Qur'ān is followed by an assurance to the Prophet that God will judge between him and his community on the basis of His perfect knowledge: *"Your Lord will judge between them in His wisdom; for He alone is Almighty, All-Knowing."* (Verse 78)

God has made the triumph of the truth a natural law similar to that of the creation

of the heavens and the earth and the succession of night and day. It never fails. It may be slow in coming, but this will only be because of a particular purpose known to God which will ensure the fulfilment of certain goals known to Him. Yet still the law remains in operation, and God's promise is certain to be fulfilled. Indeed, no one's faith is complete unless one believes in its certainty. What we need to know is that God's promise will come to pass at the moment appointed for it, and it will neither be hastened nor delayed: *"So, place your trust in God; for yours is surely the path of the clear truth."* (Verse 79)

The *sūrah* continues to comfort the Prophet so that he bears with patience the stubborn rejection by the unbelievers, despite his strenuous efforts giving them sound advice and addressing them with the Qur'ān. He is told that he has not slackened in his duty, but he can make only those with beating hearts hear. These are the ones who listen attentively, and their hearts are moved so as to respond to the Prophet who gives them honest and sound counsel. By contrast, those whose hearts are dead and who are blind to all the pointers to the truth of faith are a lost case. There is simply no access to their hearts. Therefore, the Prophet should not worry about their persistent error: *"Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verses 80-81)

The Qur'ānic style paints here a lively image of a mental condition that renders hearts, souls and feelings frozen, unresponsive. We see them first as dead, with the Prophet calling on them but they do not hear him. The second image shows them deaf, moving away from the person who is calling them. Thirdly they are shown as blind who cannot see the guide trying to set them on the right course. These three images interact to give us a profound description of their situation.

In contrast to the dead, blind and deaf we see the believers who are alive, with their hearing and seeing faculties finely tuned: *"You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]."* (Verse 81) These are the ones whose hearts are ready to receive God's revelations. They have life and they warm to it, feeling its presence. They benefit by what they hear and see. Such are the believers and the Prophet's duty is to make them hear, pointing to the signs God has placed all around us. They will then accept what he tells them and submit themselves to God.

Islam is simple, clear and very close to pure human nature. Once the heart gets to know it, it will submit to it. Thus the Qur'ān describes those hearts which are prepared to listen and be guided to the truth. They do not indulge in futile argument. Once God's Messenger calls on them, pointing to God's signs and reciting His revelations, they respond and submit.

Presages of the Last Hour

The *sūrah* then takes us on another round previewing some of the forerunners of the Day of Resurrection. It mentions the appearance of a beast that will speak to those who do not believe in God's signs that are placed in the universe. It paints a scene of the resurrection and the rebuke levelled at those who deny God's signs, while they stand speechless. It then quickly refers to the two signs that are always there to see, namely the night and the day, before taking us back to a horrendous image when the trumpet is blown and the mountains are made to move like clouds. It shows us the good believers safe from all this horror while those who have been errant are thrown on their faces in hell:

> *When the Word comes to pass against them, We will bring forth to them out of the earth a beast which will say to them that mankind had no real faith in Our revelations. On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks. And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?' And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak. Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe. On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?'* (Verses 82-90)

The first of these verses mentions a beast. The same is mentioned in many *aĥādīth,* some of which are authentic, but these do not give any description of it. There are descriptions of it in other *aĥādīth* which do not aspire to any reasonable degree of authenticity. Hence, they should be discarded. Of the many descriptions of this beast that should be so discarded are that it is 60 yards in length, that it has fluff, feathers, a beard and hoofs, that it has a bull's head, pig's eyes, elephant's ears, a deer's horns, an ostrich's neck, a lion's chest, a tiger's colour, a cat's waist, a ram's tail and a camel's limbs. Nothing of such descriptions is of any significance whatsoever.

It is better by far to limit ourselves to the text of the Qur'ān and the authentic *aĥādīth* which tell us that the appearance of the beast is a presage of the Day of

Resurrection. It is when the time for repentance has expired and judgement is due on those who rejected the faith that God will bring forth this beast to speak to them. Beasts normally do not speak, or rather their languages are not understood by humans. However, at this point people will understand what this beast says, and they will know that it is a miracle that heralds the Last Hour. But they were keen to deny God's signs and the Day of Resurrection.

It is noticeable in this *sūrah* that several scenes depict a dialogue between insects, birds, *jinn* and the Prophet Solomon. Mention of a beast that speaks to people thus fits well with those scenes, as it complements the *sūrah's* overall imagery.

The *sūrah* proceeds from this forerunner of the Day of Judgement to the scene of resurrection and gathering: *"On that day We shall gather from each community a host of those who denied Our revelations; and they shall be lined in ranks."* (Verse 83) All mankind will be gathered on that day, but the *sūrah* highlights here the position of those denying revelations. It shows them as they are driven in ranks, altogether, having no say or choice in the direction they have to go.

"And when they come forth [God] will say: Did you deny My revelations even though you did not comprehend them fully; or what was it that you were doing?" (Verse 84) The first question is one of reproach, because it is already known that they denied God's revelations, while the second is sarcastic. This combination is used in spoken language making the second question imply that they took no particularly noticeable action in their lives, apart from their denial of God's revelations. Such a question receives no answer; those to whom it is put stand speechless: *"And the Word will come to pass against them because of their wrongdoing, and they will be unable to speak."* (Verse 85) They deserve such a fate because of the wrongdoing in their lives on earth. They are unable to speak, while the beast has already spoken. What a contrast drawn in the Qur'ānic expression and also in the great signs being described in the Qur'ān.

The presentation in this round follows a special pattern, setting scenes from this life against those from the life to come, moving from one to the other at the moment when it is particularly effective. Here the *sūrah* leaves those who denied God's revelations as they stand speechless on the Day of Resurrection to draw a scene of this world which should have awakened their consciences and invited them to reflect on the universe and its creation. They should have thought of this and realized that God takes care of them, providing them with what enables them to have comfortable lives, making the universe around them suitable for life, not hostile to it: *"Are they not aware that it is We who have made the night for them to rest in, and the day to give them light? In this there are truly signs for people who will believe."* (Verse 86)

The scene of the still night and the alert day should give man a religious conscience that directs him to maintain his bond with God who alternates the night

and day. Both day and night are two universal signs that bear a clear message to anyone who accepts the faith, but unbelievers do not do so. Had there been only night or only day, life would not have been possible on earth. Indeed, had either the day or the night been ten times longer than what they are now, the sun would have burnt out every plant on earth, while at night every surviving plant would have been frozen. Life then would have been impossible. We see that the present state of the night and day is suitable to life, and this carries signs for people who respond to faith.

From this situation in our present life the *sūrah* moves immediately to the day when the trumpet is blown. This heralds great horror for all, except those protected by God's will. In addition the mountains that have been symbols of firmness and stability are made to move. The day ends with giving the good believers their reward in the form of security and goodness, while the others are punished by fear, thrown on their faces into the fire. *"On that day the trumpet will be sounded, and all who are in the heavens and the earth will be stricken with terror, except those God wills to exempt. All shall come to Him in utter humility. And you see the mountains, which you deem so firm, pass away as clouds pass away. Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do. Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day. And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire: Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?"* (Verses 87-90)

The trumpet is blown for the first time to strike terror in the hearts of all creatures except those whom God wishes to spare. It is said that those who are exempt are the martyrs. With this extraordinary sound emanating from the trumpet all living creatures are struck and become senseless. Then the trumpet is blown a second time bringing them all back to life. It is then blown again to gather them all together: *"All shall come to Him in utter humility."* (Verse 87)

With this great terror, a universal upheaval takes place with everything losing its normal systemic functioning. Thus firm mountains that have been symbols of stability move lightly like clouds. This is an image that shows the terror at its clearest. It is as if the mountains are in fear, moving with those who are struck with terror, confused, unable to determine their direction.

"Such is the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection." (Verse 88) All glory is due to Him. Perfection is clear in everything He does or makes. Nothing happens by chance or coincidence; nothing is flawed; nothing is overlooked or forgotten. When we reflect on God's creation we cannot find even a little detail left out. Indeed everything, large or small, important or not, is taken into consideration. Everything is made according to an elaborate plan that leaves the one who contemplates in utter amazement.

"He is indeed fully aware of all that you do." (Verse 88) This is now the day of reckoning when all that you have done is reckoned. It is the day set by God who has ordered all things to perfection: it has come at the time set for it, with no hastening or delay. It fulfils its role in God's method of creation and planning. It brings harmony between action and reward in the two closely linked lives. Hence, it is part of *"the work of God who has ordered all things to perfection. He is indeed fully aware of all that you do."* (Verse 88)

On this fearsome day, security and reassurance are granted only to those who did well in their first life on earth. This is in addition to their reward which exceeds by far everything they did: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; and they will be secure from the terror of that day."* (Verse 89) To be in security when all are in terror is in itself a great reward. What comes after that is granted by God's grace. These believers feared God in their first life, so He willed that they would have no fear on the Day of Judgement.

"And those who come with evil deeds, their faces will be thrust into the fire." (Verse 90) This is a terrible scene as such people are thrown on their faces into hell. They also suffer further rebuke: *"Are you now being recompensed for anything other than what you did [in life]?"* (Verse 90) They had turned their back on God's guidance, which was presented to them as clearly as night and day; so now their faces are the first to face the fire.

Summing Up Instructions

At the end the Prophet is instructed to sum up his call and his method in calling on people to believe. He leaves them to their destiny, which they have chosen for themselves after the issues have been clearly put in front of them. The *sūrah* concludes, as it started, with praising God, leaving it to Him to show them His signs and to hold them to account for their deeds:

> *I am only bidden to worship the Lord of this city who has made it sacred. To Him all things belong. And I am bidden to be one of those who submit themselves [to God]. And to recite the Qur'ān. So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: "I am only a warner.' And say: All praise is due to God. He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them. Your Lord is never heedless of what you do.'* (Verses 91-93)

The Arab idolaters used to believe in the sanctity of Makkah and the Sacred House, i.e. the Ka`bah. Indeed they based their supremacy in Arabia on belief in the sanctity of this House. Yet they did not believe in the oneness of God who made it

sacred and also made it the focus of their lives. Therefore, God's Messenger gives faith its proper value, declaring that he is commanded to worship the Lord of this sacred city, who has no partners. He states the Islamic concept of God's oneness: the Lord of this city is the Lord of everything: *"To Him all things belong."* (Verse 91) He also declares that he is bidden to be one of those who surrender themselves totally to God. No one else has any claim on them. They are a group of their own stretching over countless generations, sharing their belief in God and surrendering themselves to Him.

Such is the essence of his message, while its essential means is the recitation of the Qur'ān: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."* (Verse 92) The Qur'ān is the book of this message, and also its constitution and method. The Prophet has been ordered to strive against the unbelievers by means of the Qur'ān, because it is sufficient as a means to address hearts, minds and souls. It contains what overpowers souls, influences feelings, and violently shakes hearts. Fighting was permitted at a later stage to defend believers, ensure the freedom for God's message to address people with the Qur'ān, and to implement the divine law. As for calling people to faith, the Qur'ān itself is sufficient: *"And to recite the Qur'ān."*

"So whoever chooses to follow the right path does so for his own benefit; and if any chooses to go astray, say: I am only a warner." (Verse 92) This statement represents personal responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or error. In turn, it reflects the dignity that Islam guarantees man such that none are driven to faith against their will. It is only that we recite the Qur'ān and let it work on people in accordance with its profound and meticulous method. Needless to say, when human nature is left unshackled, it responds to the Qur'ān because its very constitution is in unison with the Qur'ānic method.

"And say: All praise is due to God." (Verse 93) This is by way of introducing what is to come concerning God's own making. *"He will indeed make you see His signs, and you will recognize them."* (Verse 93) God certainly says the truth. Every day He shows His servants some of His signs within themselves and in the great expanse of the universe. He reveals to them some of the secrets at work in the universe.

"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do." (Verse 93) This is the final note in the *sūrah,* expressed gently yet imparting an awesome sense. They are then left to do what they want, prompted by the profound note: *"Your Lord is never heedless of what you do."*

SŪRAH 28

Al-Qaşaş

(The Story)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, at a time when the Muslims were a small minority without power, while the idolaters were in full control of power, wealth, position and authority. In this context, the *sūrah* establishes the true standard of values and power: it clearly states that there is only one true power in the universe, God's, and only one true value, faith. Whoever enjoys God's support need have no fear, even though he may be bereft of material power, and whomever God opposes can enjoy neither peace nor security even though he may be in possession of all types of material power. A person who enshrines the value of faith enjoys every good thing, whilst the one who lacks it will not reap any benefit whatsoever.

The corpus of the *sūrah* deals with aspects pertaining to Moses and Pharaoh, and concludes with details about Qārūn [or Korah] and his treatment of Moses' people. The first of these two stories tackles power and authority, showing Pharaoh, a ruthless tyrant, alert to any source of danger. Then, there is Moses, a suckling baby with neither power nor shelter. Pharaoh had exalted himself, ruling over and dividing people into sections and classes, persecuting the Children of Israel, slaying their men and sparing their women, watching carefully lest they should do anything that might constitute a usurpation of his control. Yet all his might and precautions were of little avail against a little child who was cared for by the only real power that protects from all evil. Indeed this power challenges Pharaoh openly, throwing the child into his own lap, placing him in Pharaoh's own palace so as to be doted upon by his own wife, while he stands by, unable to do anything against Moses. On the contrary, he does with his own hands what brings about his downfall.

The second story demonstrates the value of wealth, as also the value of knowledge. Wealth occupied everyone's attention as they watched Qārūn strutting about in his various adornments. He possessed such enormous treasures that just to carry the keys of these treasures required a whole group of strong men, who would find the task very tiring. What is more, Qārūn also had knowledge which he thought to have brought him all this wealth. Yet those endowed with true knowledge among his people were not bewitched by such wealth. They looked to God's reward, knowing that this is infinitely better and more lasting. Then God's power intervened sinking him and his household into the earth, showing beholders that neither wealth nor knowledge were of any avail to Qārūn. The intervention here is direct just as it is with Pharaoh when he and his troops were drowned in the sea.

Both Pharaoh and Qārūn exalted themselves, tyrannizing the Children of Israel: one with the brute force of authority, the other with financial might. The end was the same in both instances: one was swallowed by the earth, the other was drowned in the sea. In neither case do we see any opposing force capable of resisting God's direct power that intervened to put an end to tyranny and injustice. The two stories clearly show that when evil and corruption are manifest, while those who are good and righteous appear powerless, God Almighty intervenes directly and openly to put an end to it all.[9]

In between the two stories, the *sūrah* takes the idolaters on a couple of rounds opening their eyes to the significance of these narrations and directs their attention to some of God's signs that are present in the universe, as also the fate of past communities or scenes from the Day of Judgement. All these endorse the moral of the stories and confirm God's unalterable law.

The unbelievers used to say to the Prophet: *"If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) In this way, they justified their rejection of the Prophet's message on the basis that people would tear them away from their land if they changed their old beliefs. In other words, they wanted to

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[9] In commenting on *Sūrah* 20, Ṭā Ĥā, I said: "We also learn from this account that when the Children of Israel accepted the humiliation Pharoah imposed on them, by virtue of his persecution campaign, killing their men and sparing their women, God did not interfere on their side. They simply accepted their subjugation, fearing Pharaoh and his power. But when faith was paramount in the hearts of those who believed in Moses and his message, and when they were ready to withstand the torture with their heads held high, declaring their rejection of Pharaoh and their belief in God, then God intervened and conducted the battle. Thus, victory was achieved on the battlefield as it was earlier achieved within their hearts and souls." (Vol. XI, p. 343.)
However, what I have just said in this *sūrah* is more accurate and accords with the import of this *sūrah*.. Yet what I said in that comment is acceptable with some change in phraseology. Here, the *sūrah* demonstrates how God's power intervened right from the outset, but the ultimate victory was only achieved when faith was clearly uppermost in the hearts of those who believed, and when they openly declared the word of truth in the face of ruthless tyranny.

ensure that people still held them in awe and reverence as they were the custodians of the Sacred Mosque. God relates here the stories of Moses and Pharaoh showing which people enjoy security and which experience overwhelming fear. It tells them that it is only under God's protection that people can truly feel secure even though their situation may appear otherwise. Fear, however, lacks such protection even though it may seem that security is fully present. Qārūn's story is related to confirm this basic truth in a different way.

The unbelievers' stance is answered as follows: *"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) This is a reminder that it is God who has provided them with security, appointing the Sacred House in their own vicinity. It is He who has extended security to them and it is He who can easily deprive them of it. This is followed by a warning against arrogance and ungratefulness: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

The *sūrah* then makes it clear to them that they have already been warned when a messenger of God has been sent to them. God's law has always been that people are destroyed if they persist in their erring ways once they have been so warned: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59)

This is followed by a scene from the Day of Judgement when they stand alone, having been publicly disowned by those beings whom they alleged to be God's partners. Thus they are made to realize what punishment they will incur on the Day of Judgement, after they have also been punished in this life. It tells them again where security lies and what brings fear.

The *sūrah* concludes with God's promise to His Messenger as he is driven out of Makkah by the idolaters. This promise makes it clear that God, who has assigned to him this Qur'ānic message and defined the duties involved in his assignment, will surely facilitate his return to his home town, giving him support against idolatry and idolaters. God had favoured him with the message to which he had never aspired. He will certainly give him support and return him to the city from which he was driven out. The stories related in this *sūrah* endorse this promise. Moses returned to the very land from which he fled in fear for his life. When he returned it was but for a relatively short time. He once again left, only this time with the Children of Israel. In this way, the Israelites were saved whilst Pharaoh met his humiliating fate.

The final note in the *sūrah* also seals God's promise: *"Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return."* (Verse 88)

Such is, in a nutshell, the *sūrah's* theme and import. This is outlined in four phases: Moses' story, the comments that follow it, Qārūn's story and this final promise.

1
Security at the Height of Danger

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. (1)

طسٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

These are verses of the Book that makes things clear. (2)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ ٱلْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe. (3)

نَتْلُواْ عَلَيْكَ مِن نَّبَإِ مُوسَىٰ وَفِرْعَوْنَ بِٱلْحَقِّ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. (4)

إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ عَلَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلَ أَهْلَهَا شِيَعًا يَسْتَضْعِفُ طَآئِفَةً مِّنْهُمْ يُذَبِّحُ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ وَيَسْتَحْىِۦ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], (5)

وَنُرِيدُ أَن نَّمُنَّ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتُضْعِفُواْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ ٱلْوَٰرِثِينَ ﴿٥﴾

and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions. (6)

وَنُمَكِّنَ لَهُمْ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ وَنُرِيَ فِرْعَوْنَ
وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا مِنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟
يَحْذَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

We revealed to the mother of Moses: "Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve. We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers.' (7)

وَأَوْحَيْنَآ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰٓ أَنْ أَرْضِعِيهِ ۖ فَإِذَا
خِفْتِ عَلَيْهِ فَأَلْقِيهِ فِي ٱلْيَمِّ وَلَا تَخَافِي
وَلَا تَحْزَنِيٓ ۖ إِنَّا رَآدُّوهُ إِلَيْكِ وَجَاعِلُوهُ
مِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٧﴾

Pharaoh's household picked him up; and so [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief. Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed. (8)

فَٱلْتَقَطَهُۥٓ ءَالُ فِرْعَوْنَ لِيَكُونَ لَهُمْ
عَدُوًّا وَحَزَنًا ۗ إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ
وَجُنُودَهُمَا كَانُوا۟ خَٰطِـِٔينَ ﴿٨﴾

Pharaoh's wife said: A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' They had no inkling [of what was to happen]. (9)

وَقَالَتِ ٱمْرَأَتُ فِرْعَوْنَ قُرَّتُ عَيْنٍ لِّي
وَلَكَ ۖ لَا تَقْتُلُوهُ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَنفَعَنَآ أَوْ
نَتَّخِذَهُۥ وَلَدًا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses' mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith. (10)

وَأَصْبَحَ فُؤَادُ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ فَٰرِغًا ۖ إِن
كَادَتْ لَتُبْدِي بِهِۦ لَوْلَآ أَن رَّبَطْنَا
عَلَىٰ قَلْبِهَا لِتَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
﴿١٠﴾

She said to his sister: 'Follow him.' So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. (11)

وَقَالَتْ لِأُخْتِهِۦ قُصِّيهِ ۖ فَبَصُرَتْ بِهِۦ عَن
جُنُبٍ وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: 'Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?' (12)

۞ وَحَرَّمْنَا عَلَيْهِ ٱلْمَرَاضِعَ مِن قَبْلُ
فَقَالَتْ هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰٓ أَهْلِ بَيْتٍ
يَكْفُلُونَهُۥ لَكُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُۥ نَٰصِحُونَ
١٢

Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this. (13)

فَرَدَدْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰٓ أُمِّهِۦ كَىْ تَقَرَّ عَيْنُهَا وَلَا
تَحْزَنَ وَلِتَعْلَمَ أَنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ
وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ١٣

When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (14)

وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَٱسْتَوَىٰٓ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ حُكْمًا
وَعِلْمًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ ١٤

One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: "This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray.' (15)

وَدَخَلَ ٱلْمَدِينَةَ عَلَىٰ حِينِ غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ
أَهْلِهَا فَوَجَدَ فِيهَا رَجُلَيْنِ يَقْتَتِلَانِ هَٰذَا
مِن شِيعَتِهِۦ وَهَٰذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِۦ ۖ
فَٱسْتَغَٰثَهُ ٱلَّذِى مِن شِيعَتِهِۦ عَلَى ٱلَّذِى
مِنْ عَدُوِّهِۦ فَوَكَزَهُۥ مُوسَىٰ فَقَضَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ۖ
قَالَ هَٰذَا مِنْ عَمَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ عَدُوٌّ
مُّضِلٌّ مُّبِينٌ ١٥

He then prayed: 'My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself, so forgive me.' So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (16)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّى ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِى فَٱغْفِرْ لِى
فَغَفَرَ لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ١٦

He said: "My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَآ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ فَلَنْ أَكُونَ
ظَهِيرًا لِّلْمُجْرِمِينَ ١٧

give help to wrongdoers.' (17)

فَأَصْبَحَ فِي ٱلْمَدِينَةِ خَآئِفًا يَتَرَقَّبُ فَإِذَا ٱلَّذِي ٱسْتَنصَرَهُۥ بِٱلْأَمْسِ يَسْتَصْرِخُهُۥ ۚ قَالَ لَهُۥ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّكَ لَغَوِيٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: "Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.' (18)

فَلَمَّآ أَنْ أَرَادَ أَن يَبْطِشَ بِٱلَّذِي هُوَ عَدُوٌّ لَّهُمَا قَالَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ أَتُرِيدُ أَن تَقْتُلَنِي كَمَا قَتَلْتَ نَفْسًۢا بِٱلْأَمْسِ ۖ إِن تُرِيدُ إِلَّآ أَن تَكُونَ جَبَّارًا فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا تُرِيدُ أَن تَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُصْلِحِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: "Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.' (19)

وَجَآءَ رَجُلٌ مِّنْ أَقْصَا ٱلْمَدِينَةِ يَسْعَىٰ قَالَ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنَّ ٱلْمَلَأَ يَأْتَمِرُونَ بِكَ لِيَقْتُلُوكَ فَٱخْرُجْ إِنِّي لَكَ مِنَ ٱلنَّٰصِحِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: "Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice.' (20)

فَخَرَجَ مِنْهَا خَآئِفًا يَتَرَقَّبُ ۖ قَالَ رَبِّ نَجِّنِي مِنَ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: "My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk.' (21)

وَلَمَّا تَوَجَّهَ تِلْقَآءَ مَدْيَنَ قَالَ عَسَىٰ رَبِّيٓ أَن يَهْدِيَنِي سَوَآءَ ٱلسَّبِيلِ ﴿٢٢﴾

And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: "I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path.' (22)

وَلَمَّا وَرَدَ مَآءَ مَدْيَنَ وَجَدَ عَلَيْهِ أُمَّةً مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ يَسْقُونَ وَوَجَدَ مِن دُونِهِمُ ٱمْرَأَتَيْنِ تَذُودَانِ ۖ قَالَ مَا خَطْبُكُمَا ۖ قَالَتَا لَا نَسْقِي حَتَّىٰ يُصْدِرَ ٱلرِّعَآءُ ۖ وَأَبُونَا شَيْخٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds and flocks], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: 'What is the matter with you two?' They said:

"We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man.' (23)

So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: 'My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me.' (24)

One of the two women then came hack to him, walking shyly, and said: "My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us.' And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: 'Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk.' (25)

Said one of the two women: "My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust.' (26)

[The father] said: "I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.' (27)

Answered [Moses]: "This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say.' (28)

When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: 'Wait

فَسَقَىٰ لَهُمَا ثُمَّ تَوَلَّىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلظِّلِّ فَقَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي لِمَآ أَنزَلۡتَ إِلَيَّ مِنۡ خَيۡرٖ فَقِيرٞ ٢٤

فَجَآءَتۡهُ إِحۡدَىٰهُمَا تَمۡشِي عَلَى ٱسۡتِحۡيَآءٖ قَالَتۡ إِنَّ أَبِي يَدۡعُوكَ لِيَجۡزِيَكَ أَجۡرَ مَا سَقَيۡتَ لَنَاۚ فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُۥ وَقَصَّ عَلَيۡهِ ٱلۡقَصَصَ قَالَ لَا تَخَفۡۖ نَجَوۡتَ مِنَ ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٢٥

قَالَتۡ إِحۡدَىٰهُمَا يَٰٓأَبَتِ ٱسۡتَـٔۡجِرۡهُۖ إِنَّ خَيۡرَ مَنِ ٱسۡتَـٔۡجَرۡتَ ٱلۡقَوِيُّ ٱلۡأَمِينُ ٢٦

قَالَ إِنِّيٓ أُرِيدُ أَنۡ أُنكِحَكَ إِحۡدَى ٱبۡنَتَيَّ هَٰتَيۡنِ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تَأۡجُرَنِي ثَمَٰنِيَ حِجَجٖۖ فَإِنۡ أَتۡمَمۡتَ عَشۡرٗا فَمِنۡ عِندِكَۖ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَنۡ أَشُقَّ عَلَيۡكَۚ سَتَجِدُنِيٓ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ٢٧

قَالَ ذَٰلِكَ بَيۡنِي وَبَيۡنَكَۖ أَيَّمَا ٱلۡأَجَلَيۡنِ قَضَيۡتُ فَلَا عُدۡوَٰنَ عَلَيَّۖ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ مَا نَقُولُ وَكِيلٞ ٢٨

۞ فَلَمَّا قَضَىٰ مُوسَى ٱلۡأَجَلَ وَسَارَ بِأَهۡلِهِۦٓ ءَانَسَ مِن جَانِبِ ٱلطُّورِ نَارٗاۖ قَالَ لِأَهۡلِهِ ٱمۡكُثُوٓاْ إِنِّيٓ ءَانَسۡتُ نَارٗا لَّعَلِّيٓ ءَاتِيكُم مِّنۡهَا بِخَبَرٍ أَوۡ جَذۡوَةٖ مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَصۡطَلُونَ ٢٩

here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.' (29)

فَلَمَّآ أَتَىٰهَا نُودِيَ مِن شَٰطِيِٕ ٱلۡوَادِ
ٱلۡأَيۡمَنِ فِي ٱلۡبُقۡعَةِ ٱلۡمُبَٰرَكَةِ مِنَ
ٱلشَّجَرَةِ أَن يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّيٓ أَنَا ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ
ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ٣٠

But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: 'Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (30)

وَأَنۡ أَلۡقِ عَصَاكَۖ فَلَمَّا رَءَاهَا تَهۡتَزُّ كَأَنَّهَا
جَآنّٞ وَلَّىٰ مُدۡبِرٗا وَلَمۡ يُعَقِّبۡۚ يَٰمُوسَىٰٓ
أَقۡبِلۡ وَلَا تَخَفۡۖ إِنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلۡأٓمِنِينَ
٣١

"Throw down your staff!' But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: "Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. (31)

ٱسۡلُكۡ يَدَكَ فِي جَيۡبِكَ تَخۡرُجۡ بَيۡضَآءَ مِنۡ
غَيۡرِ سُوٓءٖ وَٱضۡمُمۡ إِلَيۡكَ جَنَاحَكَ مِنَ
ٱلرَّهۡبِۖ فَذَٰنِكَ بُرۡهَٰنَانِ مِن رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰ
فِرۡعَوۡنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦٓۚ إِنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ قَوۡمٗا
فَٰسِقِينَ ٣٢

"Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people.' (32)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي قَتَلۡتُ مِنۡهُمۡ نَفۡسٗا فَأَخَافُ
أَن يَقۡتُلُونِ ٣٣

He said: 'My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. (33)

وَأَخِي هَٰرُونُ هُوَ أَفۡصَحُ مِنِّي لِسَانٗا
فَأَرۡسِلۡهُ مَعِيَ رِدۡءٗا يُصَدِّقُنِيٓۖ إِنِّيٓ أَخَافُ
أَن يُكَذِّبُونِ ٣٤

And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he will confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.' (34)

قَالَ سَنَشُدُّ عَضُدَكَ بِأَخِيكَ وَنَجۡعَلُ
لَكُمَا سُلۡطَٰنٗا فَلَا يَصِلُونَ إِلَيۡكُمَاۚ
بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أَنتُمَا وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَكُمَا ٱلۡغَٰلِبُونَ

Said He: "We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both

of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.’ (35)

﴿٣٥﴾

When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: ‘This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old.’ (36)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم مُّوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا بَيِّنَٰتٖ قَالُواْ
مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّا سِحۡرٞ مُّفۡتَرٗى وَمَا سَمِعۡنَا
بِهَٰذَا فِيٓ ءَابَآئِنَا ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Moses replied: “My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.’ (37)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ رَبِّيٓ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَن جَآءَ
بِٱلۡهُدَىٰ مِنۡ عِندِهِۦ وَمَن تَكُونُ لَهُۥ
عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلدَّارِۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفۡلِحُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ
﴿٣٧﴾

“Nobles!’ said Pharaoh. ‘I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.’ (38)

وَقَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنُ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمۡتُ
لَكُم مِّنۡ إِلَٰهٍ غَيۡرِي فَأَوۡقِدۡ لِي
يَٰهَٰمَٰنُ عَلَى ٱلطِّينِ فَٱجۡعَل لِّي صَرۡحٗا
لَّعَلِّيٓ أَطَّلِعُ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِ مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّهُۥ
مِنَ ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. (39)

وَٱسۡتَكۡبَرَ هُوَ وَجُنُودُهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ بِغَيۡرِ
ٱلۡحَقِّ وَظَنُّوٓاْ أَنَّهُمۡ إِلَيۡنَا لَا يُرۡجَعُونَ
﴿٣٩﴾

And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. (40)

فَأَخَذۡنَٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذۡنَٰهُمۡ فِي ٱلۡيَمِّۖ
فَٱنظُرۡ كَيۡفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ
ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. (41)

وَجَعَلۡنَٰهُمۡ أَئِمَّةٗ يَدۡعُونَ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِۖ
وَيَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ٤١

We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned. (42)

وَأَتۡبَعۡنَٰهُمۡ فِي هَٰذِهِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا لَعۡنَةٗۖ وَيَوۡمَ
ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ هُم مِّنَ ٱلۡمَقۡبُوحِينَ ٤٢

And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect. (43)

وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا مُوسَى ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ مَآ
أَهۡلَكۡنَا ٱلۡقُرُونَ ٱلۡأُولَىٰ بَصَآئِرَ لِلنَّاسِ
وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لَّعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ٤٣

Setting the Scene

"Ṭā. Sīn. Mīm. These are verses of the Book that makes things clear." (Verses 1-2) The *sūrah* begins with these three separate letters to make clear that it is from letters like these that the Qur'ān is composed. Its verses are of a greatly superior quality and of much finer import than what is normally composed by people: *"These are verses of the Book that makes things clear."* (Verse 2) Thus, this book is not the work of ordinary people; for no one can produce its like. It is revelation that God relates to His servants, reflecting His incomparable ability, and the truth that is at the heart of everything God makes, large or small: *"We shall relate to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, setting forth the truth for people who will believe."* (Verse 3) It is then to the believers that this book is addressed. It is meant to remould and cultivate them, pointing out their way for them and showing them the code to implement. The stories related in this *sūrah* are meant for those believers, because they are the ones who will benefit from them.

This direct relation from God imparts an air of the special care taken of believers, making them feel worthy and important. How could they fail to realize this, when it is God Almighty that relates His book to His Messenger for their own sake. Being believers, they have the necessary qualities to receive such sublime care: *"for people who will believe."* (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* then relates the story of Moses and Pharaoh, right from its very first moment, when Moses was born. Although Moses' story is related in many other

sūrahs, it is never recounted from the very beginning anywhere else. It is this very beginning, describing the difficult circumstances in which Moses was born, powerless among a people who had long been persecuted and humiliated by Pharaoh, that serves as the main theme of the *sūrah.* It shows the hand of the divine will working openly, without any apparent human medium, striking directly at the root of tyranny and injustice. It thus gives support and empowerment to the oppressed. This is a concept that the small and weak Muslim minority in Makkah needed to fully understand. It was equally important that the powerful majority be made well aware of it too.

In the majority of cases, Moses' story, frequently related in other *sūrahs,* begins with him receiving his message, giving an account of how strong faith stands up to tyrannical power, and eventually leading to the triumph of faith and the defeat of tyranny. But this is not the message this *sūrah* intends to give. Its message is that when evil is at its zenith, it carries the cause of its own destruction, and when aggression is let loose, it does not need people to fight and repel it. God will intervene to support the powerless who are made to suffer at its hands. He will then save the good elements among them, educating them and making them leaders of mankind and the inheritors of the earth.

Such is the purpose of relating this story in this *sūrah.* Hence, it begins with the episode that highlights this aspect. Every story related in the Qur'ān is told in the way that best serves the purpose of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. It is a means to educate people and to emphasize concepts, values and meanings. Hence, it is made to fit smoothly with the context in which it occurs.

The episodes of Moses' story that are told here are those of his birth in exceptionally difficult circumstances and how God took care of him; his youth and the wisdom and knowledge God imparted to him. It also covers the events that occurred; how he killed an Egyptian, fled from Egypt after learning about a plot to kill him, his marriage in the land of Madyan and the time he spent there. It then moves on to his being called by God and given his message; the confrontation with Pharaoh and his people and how they rejected both Moses and Aaron, and finally a quick reference to Pharaoh's ultimate end.

The first two episodes, which are mentioned only in this *sūrah,* are treated at length because they bring to the fore the open challenge to aggressive tyranny. We clearly see how Pharaoh is totally unable to evade God's will despite all his precautions and manoeuvres: *"But it was Our will... to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their [i.e. the oppressed] hands the very things against which they were taking precautions."* (Verse 6)

Following the Qur'ānic method, the story is actually shown in a series of scenes

with some gaps in between that are left to our imagination. In fact the reader does not miss anything of the events and images that are left out between scenes. On the contrary, we actually enjoy the active participation of our imagination. The first episode is recounted in five scenes, while the second takes up nine scenes, followed by four scenes in the third episode. In between each two episodes there is a wide or narrow gap, as is between scenes, allowing the curtains to drop and be lifted again. Before relating the events of the story, however, the *sūrah* sets the scene against which it all unfolds, thus telling us the story's overall purpose:

> *Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption. But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions.* (Verses 4-6)

Thus the stage is set, and the hand that controls events is shown, together with the goal to be achieved. Declaring to whom this hand belongs right at the outset is intentional and fits the drift of the story from beginning to end.

We do not know for certain the identity of the Pharaoh in whose reign these events took place. Defining specific historical periods is not important in Qur'ānic stories, as these do not contribute anything to their morals. It is sufficient that we know that it all took place long after the Prophet Joseph's time. It was Joseph who brought his father, Jacob or Israel, and his brothers to Egypt where they lived for several generations and, thus, becoming a large community.

When the Pharaoh of this story took power, he attributed to himself too much personal power and divided the people of Egypt into castes.

The Children of Israel were the most oppressed group during his reign, because they followed a religion different from the one he and his own people followed. They believed in the faith preached by their first grandfather, Abraham, and his grandson, Jacob. Despite all the distortions that had crept into their faith, they still retained their basic belief in the One God and denied Pharaoh's claims to be a deity. Indeed, they rejected Pharaohnic polytheism altogether.

The tyrant felt that the presence of this community represented a threat to his throne, not least because they could side with hostile neighbours. He could not, however, expel them because of their large numbers, amounting to hundreds of thousands. He, therefore, hit on a devilish plan to forestall the danger he anticipated from such a community that did not recognize him as their deity. His plan involved

putting them to do the hardest and most dangerous of jobs, thereby ensuring their suffering. On top of all this, he slew their male children at birth, but spared their female offspring. This ensured that their women would be much larger in number than their men, and so weaken them. Historical reports also suggest that he appointed birth attendants to inform him of what children were born to the Israelites, in this way enabling the slaying of all the males, showing no compassion for their tender age. It was in such circumstances that Moses was born: *"Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he persecuted, slaying their sons and keeping their women alive. For certain, he was one who sows corruption."* (Verse 4)

God, however, wanted and willed something totally different from what this tyrant wanted. Despotic rulers are often deceived by their own power and the means available to them. They forget God, His power and His planning, thinking that they choose what they wish both for themselves and for their enemies. They believe that nothing can stop them from fulfilling their own agenda.

God declares here what He wishes and challenges Pharaoh, Hāmān[10] and their hosts, telling them that whatever precautions they might take will be of no avail: *"But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the ones to inherit [the land], and to establish them securely on earth, and to let Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts experience at their hands the very things against which they were taking precautions."* (Verses 5-6) Thus God wants to grant the oppressed some of His gifts, which He does not specify, and to change their situation making them leaders after they have been subjected to other people's leadership. He also wanted to give them the Holy Land once they had attained a degree of faith and righteousness which made them worthy of it. God's intent, then was to give the Children of Israel power and security, and at the same time foil Pharaoh's plans.

Thus the *sūrah* paints a clear picture of both the existing situation and the future one. It does this prior to its recounting of events so as to place Pharaoh's boasting power, which to human sensibilities appears enormous, face to face with God's infinite power, against which nothing can stand.

The stage is thus set and the audience's interest so focused that they are now eager to know how this objective can be achieved. This adds life to the story; it is as though it is being acted out now, rather than centuries ago. Such is the general Qur'ānic method of storytelling.

Saving Moses

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[10] Hāmān was Pharaoh's assistant. From the Qur'ānic references to him we can assume that he occupied a position which is equivalent to that of a Prime Minister. — Editor's note.

The story begins and we are told how God's hand works directly, and not through anyone else. Moses was born under the sort of difficult circumstances the *sūrah* has described: a newborn baby in great danger. We almost see the knife being taken out to cut his throat. His mother is so worried, fearing that the news of his birth might reach the despotic authorities. She is well aware that if it did she would not be able to protect or hide him. How could she prevent him from crying and so betraying his presence? She knew herself to be helpless and powerless.

At this point God's hand intervenes, making direct contact with the worried mother, and inspiring her with what to do: *"We revealed to the mother of Moses: 'Breast-feed him, and then when you have cause to fear for him, cast him in the river, and have no fear and do not grieve.'"* (Verse 7) What sort of inspiration is this? A caring mother suckling her child is told to cast him into the river should she fear for his life. She is told, however, not to fear or grieve for him: *"have no fear and do not grieve."* He will be under the care of the One who provides all security and dispels all fear. He will be looked after by the hand which makes the fire a cool and relaxing place, and makes the sea a place of shelter and repose. No Pharaoh dare come near anyone this hand protects.

"We shall restore him to you." (Verse 7) You need not fear for his life or worry about his being taken away from you. *"And shall make him one of Our messengers."* (Verse 7) This is a promise for the future, and God's promise is certain to come true.

This is the first scene showing a worried mother as she received a clear, reassuring revelation that promises a bright future. The revelation removes all fear and worry from her heart, giving her peace and reassurance. The *sūrah* does not mention how she reacted or how she carried out the instructions. Instead, the curtains fall only to rise again bringing us the next scene.

"Pharaoh's household picked him up." (Verse 8) Is this the security promised her? Does it augur the fulfilment of the happy news she has been given? How, when she feared for her son none other than Pharaoh and his household? It is they that now have him. Nothing could have worried her more than her child falling into their hands. Here, we see the challenge thrown down openly, in full view of all. It is a challenge to Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. They were chasing down every newborn male in Moses' community because of fear for their own positions. Their spies were everywhere, so that no newly born boy could escape their watchful eyes. Now God's hand effortlessly puts into their very own midst such a child. It is indeed the child who will bring about their downfall. He is now in their hands and he is helpless, unable to fend for himself. Indeed, he cannot cry for help, should he be in danger.

The purpose behind delivering the child to Pharaoh is also clearly stated: *"So [in time] he would become an enemy to them and a source of grief"* (Verse 8) He will certainly be an open foe, challenging them, and bringing grief and sorrow. *"Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts were sinners indeed."* (Verse 8)

Yet how will all this come about when the child is so helpless? The *sūrah* tells us straightaway: *"Pharaoh's wife said. - A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you. Do not kill him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son. 'They had no inkling [of what was to happen]."* (Verse 9) God's hand not only delivers the child into Pharaoh's fortified palace by way of an open challenge, it also takes him right into his wife's heart, thus providing him with loving protection. It thus gives him a thin, transparent cover of love overflowing from a woman's heart. Thus, he needs neither weapons, authority nor money for his protection. Such love defies Pharaoh, his despotism and his fear for his kingdom. Pharaoh is too small and humble in God's measure: the child needs no more than this thin covering of love to enjoy complete protection from him.

"A joy to the eye he will be for me and for you." (Verse 9) This is how she describes the child brought to them, the one who will become their enemy and bring them all, except for the woman herself, much grief. *"Do not kill him,"* yet it is he who will bring about Pharaoh's end. *"He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son,"* when it will be through him that their fate will be sealed. *"They had no inkling [of what was to happen]."* (Verse 9) What irony! Thus ends the second scene and the curtains fall here temporarily.

What about his mother though, who must have been justifiably apprehensive? *"By the morning an aching void came over the heart of Moses' mother, and she would indeed have disclosed his identity had We not strengthened her heart so that she could continue to have faith."* (Verse 10) She did as she was told and threw her child into the river. Where is he now though? Where has the river carried him? She might well have asked herself how she could have done such a thing. How could she even hope that he would find security in the midst of such danger?

The *sūrah* portrays a telling picture of a poor mother's anxious heart. It is *"a void',* one whereby she is unable to think or act. *"She would indeed have disclosed his identity,"* betraying her own secret. We can imagine her being driven in a moment of despair to give the whole thing away: *"Had We not strengthened her heart,"* giving her added strength to deal with this very difficult situation. *"So that she could continue to have faith."* (Verse 10) She needed to have faith in God's promise, to be patient in the adversity she was faced with and to continue to follow His guidance.

She nevertheless exerted her own efforts so as to know what had happened to the child: *"She said to his sister: 'Follow him.'"* (Verse 11) She asked her daughter to follow

the child in his box floating along the river, so as to know whether he survived or not. The girl did as instructed, seeking to establish what happened to her baby brother. She went into different quarters and markets, and she soon saw him from a distance, carried by some of Pharaoh's servants who were looking for someone to suckle him. At this point things regain an air of calm:

> *So she watched him from a distance, while they were unaware. Right from the very beginning We caused him to refuse all nurses' breasts. So, his sister said: "Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?'* (Verses 11-12)

Here we see the working of God's will completing its scheme to thwart Pharaoh. It brings the child to them, they pick him up, and furthermore they are made to love him from the very first moment. Thus, they look for a suckling mother for him, but God made him refuse all breasts to increase their confusion and helplessness. Every time a new breast was offered to him he refused it. Thus they feared for the child's life. They continued in this situation until his sister saw him at a distance and recognized him. She soon realized how eager they were to find someone who could take care of him. She carefully approached them: *"Shall I direct you to a family who might bring him up for you and take good care of him?"* (Verse 12) They were delighted with what she said, hoping that it could be true and that the child would be saved.

This fourth scene is over, and the next one starts immediately, showing the child back with his mother, thriving, well protected by Pharaoh and cared for by his wife. While fear was everywhere around him, he enjoyed complete security: *"Thus We restored him to his mother, so that she might rejoice in him and grieve no more, and that she might know that God's promise always comes true; even though most people do not know this."* (Verse 13)

In Full Vigour

The *sūrah* does not tell us anything about the many years that separate its first two episodes: namely Moses' birth and rescue and the second showing him as a mature adult in his prime. We do not know what happened after he was restored to his mother for suckling, how he was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, what sort of relation he had with his real mother after he was weaned, what position he had in the palace or outside it when he grew up. Nor are we told anything about Moses' faith during these years, when God took care of him, preparing him, in the midst of Pharaoh's worshippers and priest, for the mission which would, in time, be assigned to him.

The *sūrah is* silent on all these points. As it starts its narration of the second episode, we see a fully mature Moses, a man endowed with wisdom and knowledge, and one granted the reward of righteous people: *"When he attained his full manhood and became fully mature, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 14)

This verse identifies a man of full physical growth and mental maturity, a stage of life normally attained when a person is around 30 years of age. Did Moses stay in Pharaoh's palace as his adopted son until he reached such an age? Did he move elsewhere given how uncomfortable he must have felt with the prevailing state of affairs? How could Moses, with his pure and untainted nature, feel otherwise? His mother must have informed him of his true identity, the community to which he belonged, and its faith. He certainly witnessed the injustice and persecution meted out to his people, as also the extensive corruption prevalent in Egyptian society.

We have no evidence pointing to any of this, but the development of events imparts a feeling of how things moved. The granting of wisdom and knowledge to Moses is followed by this comment: *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* This suggests that he did well, and God rewarded him with superior knowledge and wisdom:

> *One day he entered the city at a time when its people were unaware [of his presence]. He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies, whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him. He said: 'This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray.' He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me. 'So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. He said: My Lord! For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers.'* (Verses 15-17)

We are told that he '*entered the city*', which we understand as the Egyptian capital. Where had he come from so as to enter the city? Was he in the palace at Ein Shams? Or had he deserted the palace and the capital but came in this time when the people were unaware of his presence? He might have come around noon when people were resting? Anyway, however he arrived, he nonetheless witnessed something not to his liking: *"He found there two men fighting, one belonging to his own people and the other to his enemies. And the one from his own people cried out to him for help against the one from his enemies."* (Verse 15)

One of the two was an Egyptian, said to belong to Pharaoh's staff, with some reports suggesting that he was his cook. The other was an Israelite. The two were

fighting as Moses came into the city, and the Israelite appealed to him for help against their Egyptian enemy. How could this happen? How could an Israelite appeal to Moses, Pharaoh's adopted son against another from Pharaoh's court? This would not have happened if Moses was still residing in the palace, or if he was one of Pharaoh's courtiers. It could only have happened if the Israelite was certain that Moses no longer had any contact with the palace, and that he was in reality an Israelite opposed to Pharaoh and sympathetic to his own people's cause. This last possibility is more in line with Moses' character. For it is unlikely that he would have tolerated life in the corrupt environment of the palace.

"Whereupon Moses struck him down with his fist and killed him." (Verse 15) The Arabic word *wakaza,* used for "struck', indicates a punch delivered with the full weight of one's arm. We understand that Moses punched the man only once, and that this caused his death. We thus have an idea of Moses' physical strength, his anger and the strength of his opposition to Pharaoh and those of his court.

However, it appears from the drift of the narrative that Moses did not intend to kill the Egyptian. Indeed, when he saw him lifeless, he regretted what he had done, attributing it to Satan's temptation. His action was the result of anger, and anger is a devil or part of what Satan manipulates: *"He said: This is of Satan's doing! Indeed, he is an open foe, seeking to lead man astray."* (Verse 15)

He goes on to show genuine regret for what his anger caused, acknowledging that by so doing, he had wronged himself, had burdened himself with such results. He appealed to God for forgiveness. *"He then prayed: My Lord! I have certainly wronged myself so forgive me."* (Verse 16) God responded to his prayer, knowing that his repentance was genuine: *"So He forgave him. He alone is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."*

It appears that his refined sense indicated to him that God had responded to his appeal and forgiven him. A believer's heart, which has reached such a superior level of sensitivity, feels that his prayer has been answered once it is made. As he felt such acceptance, Moses trembled and made a firm pledge, considering this as part of his gratitude for God's favours: *"He said: My Lord.' For all that with which You have blessed me, never shall I give help to wrongdoers."* (Verse 17) This is an absolute pledge and commitment to neither side with nor help wrongdoing people. It is a disavowal of wrongdoing in all shapes and forms, even though the person might feel strongly motivated to give such help by the need to rebel against injustice.

Thus Moses shows both his appreciation of God's favours and his profound sorrow at the injustice he had committed. In all this, we *see* Moses as a passionate, spontaneous person, capable of reacting strongly to events and situations. Indeed, we will see such aspects of his character in several instances, not least in the very next scene:

Next morning, he was in the city, fearful, vigilant, when he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help. Moses said to him: 'Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow.' But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: 'Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.' (Verses 18-19)

Only a day had passed since the first fight ended with the death of an Egyptian, followed by God's acceptance of Moses' repentance and Moses subsequent pledge never to support wrongdoing. Inevitably, he feared his offence be discovered. We see him on his guard, expecting a reaction at any moment. This again reflects his spontaneous character. We are given the impression that as he walked *in the city'*, which is normally a place of security, he experienced real fear.

That Moses should feel such fear suggests that at this stage he did not have any association with Pharaoh's palace. Under tyranny, it is a trifling matter when anyone close to the palace kills a person. Indeed, such a person would not have entertained any fear, let alone expect any harm to befall him. Yet as he walked vigilantly, Moses looked up and there *"he saw the man who sought his help the day before again crying out to him for help."* (Verse 18) The same man is again appealing to Moses for more support, and probably wanting him to do with this one what he did to the other the day before.

The Secret is Exposed

The image of the man falling dead only the day before was still vivid in Moses' mind, as was his regret, repentance, and pledge to God. His fear that he may come to harm as a result was also genuinely felt, which explains Moses' outburst accusing the Israelite of being quarrelsome: *"Moses said to him: "Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow."* (Verse 18) The man appeared to be involved in endless quarrels which inevitably enhanced angry feelings against the Children of Israel at a time when they could not protect themselves or mount a full- scale revolution. Nothing good could come from such animosity.

Yet Moses was nonetheless full of anger against the Egyptian and moved to strike him as he had the other. This again gives us a glimpse of his passionate and spontaneous personality, of how strongly he was affected by the injustice suffered by the Israelites and how keen he was to do whatever he could to repel aggression.

But then, when he was about to strike the one who was their enemy, the latter exclaimed: Moses! Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday? You

> *want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right.'* (Verse 19)

When injustice is widespread and values are undermined, good people will be greatly distressed to see wrongdoing practically shaping society's laws and traditions, and corrupting people's nature so as to make them accept injustice without a thought of taking action to repel it. Indeed people's nature may suffer such degeneration that they may reproach the victim for resisting injustice. They may even describe as "tyrant in the land' a person who tries to prevent injustice being done to him or to others, as this second Egyptian called Moses. The fact is that the situation where tyranny smites at will, with no one to resist it, has become so familiar that people tend to accept it as the norm that reflects good manners, propriety and sound social structure. Should anyone rise to destroy such foul structure, their outcry would be loud, calling such rebel a killer or a tyrant. He would be the recipient of much of their blame, while the wrongdoer will get away with little criticism, if at all. The victim will be denied any justification, even though people realize that he could not tolerate injustice any longer.

Moses was so upset at the injustices suffered for so long by the Israelites that we see him first taking spontaneous action and then regretting it, then we see him moved to almost repeat the action he had earlier regretted. Therefore, God did not abandon him. On the contrary, He took care of him and responded to his prayer. God knows human nature and that people have a limit for their tolerance. Therefore, when injustice is acute and the way to restore justice is blocked, the oppressed may well go on the attack, risking all. Hence we do not see Moses' action painted in stark colours, as often happens when human nature becomes distorted in communities where injustice persists.

This is what we understand from the way the Qur'ān describes the two events and what follows. It neither provides justification for Moses' action, nor does it exaggerate its significance. Perhaps its description of Moses as wronging himself stems from the fact that his action was motivated by ethnic affiliation when as God's choice as His messenger he should have remained above all this. Or it may be that his action precipitated a fight with individuals who served tyranny, which is of little avail in achieving the ultimate goal of freedom. In this way, then, the whole situation was akin to that in Makkah when God restrained the Muslims from fighting until the appropriate time.

It nonetheless appears that accusing fingers were pointing in a certain way as regards the Egyptian's death the day before. Perhaps Moses was suspected in the light of his outspoken criticism of Pharaoh's tyranny. Or it may be that the Israelite had whispered to some of his own people, such that the secret was out, spreading

beyond the Israelite community. We think this highly probable. For Moses to kill one of Pharaoh's men would have brought joy to the Israelite community. Such a piece of news will easily and speedily circulate, giving comfort and satisfaction. This is easily enhanced if Moses was widely known to hate injustice and to support its victims.

Thus, when Moses seemed about to strike the second Egyptian, the latter confronted him with a clear accusation: *"Do you want to kill me as you killed another man yesterday?"* (Verse 19) He then continued his outburst, *"You want only to become a tyrant in the land, and you do not want to be one who sets things right."* (Verse 19) Moses might well have been seen as a pious and virtuous man who would love to set things on the right course. Thus, the Egyptian reminds him of this, in effect accusing Moses of violating his own principles, being a tyrant rather than a reformer, killing people instead of setting their relations on the right course. The way this is phrased suggests that Moses was not at the time a member of Pharaoh's court. Had he been thus considered, the Egyptian would not have dared to talk to him in such a way. He might have thought it better to take up a totally different line of address.

Some commentators suggest that these sentences were spoken by the Israelite rather than the Egyptian, in response to Moses saying to him, *"Indeed, you are clearly a quarrelsome fellow."* These commentators say that the Israelite thought Moses was angry with him and wanted to strike him. Hence, he raised his voice revealing the secret he alone knew. They base their argument on the fact that the secret was unknown to the Egyptians. It is more likely, however, that the Egyptian was the one who said it. We have explained how the secret might have been aired, and also suggested that the Egyptians might in any case have divined the circumstances of the situation.

Warning by a Well-Wisher

It appears that when the man reminded him of events the day before Moses did not proceed. The Egyptian was spared, left to run off and tell Pharaoh and his men that Moses was the killer. Here again there is a gap in the story. The next thing we are told of concerns a man hurrying from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses of a plot to do away with him. He further advised Moses that he should flee the city to save his life:

> *Then a man came at speed from the farthest end of the city. He said: Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice.* (Verse 20)

This is clearly the work of God's hand. At the right moment, something intervenes

to carry out His will. The leading personalities of Pharaoh's government were now aware that Moses was responsible for their compatriot's death. They would have seen this as spelling danger, smacking of rebellion by the Children of Israel. Hence, Moses needed to be removed. Had it been an ordinary case of murder, it would have not deserved that Pharaoh and his chiefs be preoccupied with it. Therefore, God's hand selected one of those very people to precipitate events. Most probably he was the one believer in Pharaoh's household who had kept his faith secret and who is mentioned in detail in *Sūrah* 40, The Believer. He was chosen to go at speed from the farthest end of the city to warn Moses before Pharaoh's men could reach him. It was a simple warning: *"Moses! The nobles are plotting to kill you. So get yourself away. I am giving you sincere advice."* (Verse 20)

"So he left the city in fear, vigilant. He prayed: My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk." (Verse 21) Once more we see Moses' spontaneous and passionate personality, as he reacts to different situations. He is in fear, on guard, directly appealing to God for help and protection. He seeks his security with God, prays for His care: *"My Lord! Save me from all wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* follows him as he stealthily leaves the city, keeping on the alert, alone with no support other than what he hopes to receive from God Almighty. *"And as he turned his face towards Madyan, he said: I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Again we note certain prominent traits in Moses' personality as he moves quickly along a desert road, trying to evade his chasers. He aims for Madyan, which is to the north of Ĥijāz in the Arabian Peninsula and to the south of Syria and Palestine. It is a very long journey, one which he undertakes with little preparedness. At the same time, we note how he is full of faith, surrendering himself to God, seeking His guidance: *"I do hope that my Lord will guide me to the right path."* (Verse 22)

Once more we find Moses at the centre of a harrowing situation after having enjoyed not only a life of security but also one characterized by ease and affluence. He is now alone lacking all apparent means of security, chased everywhere by Pharaoh and his troops. The Egyptians want to do to him now what they failed to do when he was a baby. But the hand that provided for him then will now protect him here. Thus, Moses is able to cover the long distance to Madyan where he is safe.

> *When he arrived at the wells of Madyan, he found there a large group of people drawing water [for their herds], and at some distance from them he found two women who were keeping back their flock. He asked them: "What is the matter with you two?' They said: "We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen drive home. Our father is a very old man.' So he watered their flock for them, and then he withdrew into the shade and prayed: My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send*

me.' (Verses 23-24)

His long trek had taken him to Madyan, tired and exhausted. Yet the scene before him is one that a person with sound moral sense cannot condone. Moses sees many herdsmen and shepherds bringing their cattle and sheep to drink at the water, but two women stand aside, prevented from watering their flock. Those with a good sense of integrity and morality would have allowed the two women to water their sheep first and then leave before the men took care of their cattle. Despite his exhaustion, Moses, the stranger, could not accept what he saw. He stepped forward to ask the two ladies: *"What is the matter with you two?"* (Verse 23)

They appraised him of their situation: *"They said: We cannot water [our animals] until the herdsmen and shepherds drive home. Our father is a very old man."* (Verse 23) As women, they could not fend for themselves in the midst of so many men. Furthermore, their father was an old man who could not compete with younger and stronger men. Moses' sense of fairness could not abide this. He stepped forward to put things right. He watered their flock for them before the rest, as honourable people should have done in the first place. He does not stop to consider his own position first, as a runaway in a place where he knows no one and where he has no support. Yet nothing stops him from acting as the honourable man he is.

"So he watered their flock for them." (Verse 24) This testifies to his noble soul, one reared under God's watchful eye. It also speaks of his physical strength, something that makes him feared even when exhausted by his long trek. It might be his mental rather than physical power that made the other shepherds hold him in awe. People are normally more affected by spiritual strength.

"Then he withdrew into the shade." (Verse 24) This suggests that it was the hot season when Moses undertook his long journey. And then he sends a prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) He seeks the physical shade to rest his tired limbs. He seeks the great shade spread by God, whose generosity is unlimited, to comfort his heart and soul. This is the essence of his prayer: *"My Lord! Truly am I in dire need of any good which You may send me."* (Verse 24) In my weakness in this lonely, hot place where I am a stranger, I am, my Lord, in dire need of Your kind help and endless favours. This whispered, passionate prayer reflects the warmth of Moses' heart and his confident pursuit of God's kindness. It tells us of the strong bond Moses feels with his Lord.

Security in a New Home

We have barely had time to absorb Moses' passionate prayer when the *sūrah* quickly moves on to the next scene that ushers in an end to his troubles. This begins

with the conjunction *fa,* indicating a quick sequence. It is as if the heavens rush to respond to Moses' prayer:

> *One of the two women then came back to him, walking shyly, and said: My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us."* (Verse 25)

It is a quick rescue granted by God. It comes in the form of an invitation sent by the old man, who wants to extend his hospitality to Moses for his noble action. The invitation is delivered by *"one of the two'* who came *walking shyly,'* as a virtuous young woman should walk, displaying neither adornment nor temptation. She delivers the invitation in a brief and clear manner which the Qur'ān expresses as: *"My father invites you, so that he might duly reward you for having watered our flock for us."* (Verse 25) Shy as she was, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, and delivers her message in full. This is, again, a reflection of a pure and virtuous nature. Her shyness does not overcome her, because she is assured by her purity and virtue.

The *sūrah* ends this brief scene, limiting it to the delivery of the invitation and Moses' acceptance. The next scene shows Moses with the old man whose name is withheld. Some reports say he was called Yathrūn and that he was the Prophet Shu`ayb's nephew.[11] *"And when [Moses] went to him and told him his story, he said: Have no fear. You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 25)

Moses was in need of security, as also of something to eat and drink, but his need for the former was stronger. Hence, the account given in the *sūrah* emphasizes this, making the first words the old man says in comment to Moses' story: *"Have no fear."* He wanted him to feel at ease by dispelling his fear. He then explains: *"You are now safe from those wrongdoing folk."* (Verse 25) They have no authority over Madyan.

We then hear a feminine voice that reflects honesty and propriety: *"Said one of the two women: My father! Hire him; for the best person that you could hire is one who is strong and worthy of trust."* (Verse 26) Both she and her sister have endured the hard task of tending sheep, fending for themselves in the midst of men. Neither of them is happy

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[11] I have already said once in this book that the man was Shu`ayb himself, and I said on another occasion that he might have been Shu`ayb but equally might have been someone else. Now I am more inclined to say that he was not the Prophet Shu`ayb, but rather an old man from Madyan. What makes me say so is that this man is said to have been old, while Shu`ayb witnessed the end of his disbelieving people, and only those who believed in him were saved. Had the man been the Prophet Shu`ayb, living with a small number of believers who had been spared, such people would not have behaved in the way described here. They would not have watered their animals before those belonging to their prophet. Believers do not treat their prophet and his daughters in this way. Moreover, the Qur'ān does not mention anything about the old man teaching Moses, his son-in-law, anything. Had he been the Prophet Shu`ayb, we would have heard the clear voice of prophethood over the ten years he spent with him.

with this. They would prefer to be at home, doing the work of women, and not having to compete with strangers at grazing and watering places. They are, after all, virtuous women. Here, the one who speaks sees a young man, a stranger in their town, but at the same time someone who is strong and trustworthy. She has seen how the other shepherds held him in awe, making way for him when he watered her sheep. But he is in a weak position because he is a stranger. She also recognized him as worthy of trust when she noticed his sense of propriety as she delivered her father's invitation to him. Hence, she advises her father to hire him so that he would spare her and her sister the trouble of doing a shepherd's work. She commends him for his ability to do the work as also his honesty and integrity. As she gives this advice, she speaks clearly, without hesitation, fearing no misunderstanding or unworthy suggestion.

We need not bother ourselves with what commentators exaggerate about Moses' physical strength, saying for example, that he, single- handed, lifted the stone covering the well. Normally, it would have taken 20 or 40 men to lift it. In fact, the well was not covered, but the herdsmen were watering their cattle and flocks, and Moses either moved them away while he watered the two women's sheep, or joined them as they watered their own cattle.

Nor do we need to bother with those reports that speak about his integrity suggesting that he said to the woman that she should walk behind him and direct him as to which way to go. Thus, he would not see her walking in front of him. Other reports suggest that he said this after the wind lifted her skirts and exposed her legs. All this is unnecessary, trying to remove suspicion that does not exist. Both Moses and the girl were naturally prudish, and this reflects in their normal behaviour, without any affectation.

A Marriage Proposal

The old man acted on his daughter's advice. He probably sensed a mutual liking between his daughter and Moses, one which could be the basis for a happy family. It is only natural that a young woman with a healthy, uncorrupted nature be inclined towards a man in whom she discerns strength and honesty. Hence, the old man combined the two purposes, suggesting to Moses that he marries one of his daughters in return for eight years work. Should Moses increase the period to ten years, this would be an added favour, not a commitment to which he would be held:

> *[The father] said: 'I will give you one of these two daughters of mine in marriage on the understanding that you will remain eight years in my service. If you should complete ten years, it will be of your own choice. I do not wish to impose any hardship*

on you. You will find me, if God so wills, an upright man.' (Verse 27)

Frankly and simply the old man offered one of his daughters, without naming her, as a wife for Moses, but he might have felt that the intended girl was known to him as they seemed inclined towards each other. He stated this without any embarrassment, for the offer was one of marriage. There is after all nothing to be embarrassed about when the aim is to build a home and establish a family. It is only when people move away from sound, natural values, to observe unhealthy traditions, that they are unnecessarily restricted. Thus, in our social environment today, we see that no parent or guardian can approach a man of sound faith and integrity to propose that he should marry his daughter, sister or other relative. Such traditions make it imperative that the man or his parents should make the proposal, as it is improper that a proposal should be made by the woman's side. The irony is that under such deviant traditions and in such social environment young men and women meet, talk and play together without any intention to get engaged to be married. Once the idea of marriage is entertained, affected shyness is observed and other barriers are erected to prevent any simple, frank and honest discussion.

During the Prophet's lifetime, fathers used to offer their daughters to men in marriage. Indeed, women offered themselves to the Prophet or to whoever he wished them to marry. This was done in all honesty and propriety, without any embarrassment for anyone. \`Umar offered his daughter in marriage to Abū Bakr first, but he did not answer, so he then offered her to \`Uthmān but he regretfully declined. Then \`Umar told the Prophet who comforted him saying that God may give her a better husband than both. It was the Prophet who then married her. A woman also offered herself to the Prophet but he expressed his regret. She then placed herself under his care so as to marry her to whomever he thought suitable. He married her to a man who had nothing to offer as dowry except his having learnt two *sūrahs,* which he undertook to teach her. This, then, was the dowry she received.

With such an open and simple approach Islamic society used to build its homes. Nothing needed to be done under cover, or with affected or devious means. This is exactly what the old man did with regard to Moses, promising not to impose any hardship on him or to ask of him what was beyond his means. He hoped that, with God's grace, Moses would find him to be an upright man. This is the most appropriate way of talking about oneself. One neither boasts of one's virtues nor emphatically states that one is a good person. One only hopes to be so, leaving the matter to God.

Moses accepted the offer, and the contract was made, clear and precise, with God as a witness: *"Answered [Moses]: This is agreed between me and you. Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged. God is the witness to all we say."* (Verse 28)

Contractual agreements must be made in all clarity, leaving no room for ambiguity. Neither parry should allow shyness or embarrassment to interfere with such purpose. Thus, Moses approves the offer and accepts the conditions outlined by the old man. He then repeats the main condition to ensure that there is no misunderstanding: *"Whichever of the two terms I fulfil, I trust I shall not be wronged."* (Verse 28) Whether I stay eight or ten years I shall not be wronged with regard to the working conditions, or with being forced to stay ten years. Any stay beyond eight years is a matter of my own choice. *"God is the witness to all we say."* (Verse 28) God is the witness who ensures justice between the two parties to any contract.

Moses put this so clearly because he was a straight and frank person who wanted the agreement to be absolutely clear and precise. Yet he also intended to stay the longer term, and did actually do so. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) mentioned that Moses "spent the longer and better of the two terms." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

Thus Moses found a place of security in his father-in-law's home, having no fear of Pharaoh and his designs. This was certainly for a definite purpose God wanted to accomplish. We will now let this episode pass, as the *sūrah* does not state anything further about it.

On the Way Back

The ten years agreed between the two men have passed, bringing us to the story's third episode. We see Moses on the road again, backtracking along the route he had taken alone ten years previously. This time though he is travelling with his family. The atmosphere on this second journey is totally different. He is about to receive, on the way, something that he could never have imagined. His Lord will call him and speak to him. He will assign to him the mission for which He has prepared him. Moses is, thus, to deliver God's message to Pharaoh and his nobles, asking them to release the Children of Israel so that they can worship God alone, associating no partners with Him, and taking possession of the land God has promised them. In this way, Moses would be an enemy and source of grief for Pharaoh, Hāmān and their hosts. In essence, he would bring about their downfall.

> *When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: "Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.' But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site: Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds. Throw down your stair' But when*

he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back. [God said]: Moses! Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure. Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining] white without blemish. Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear. These, then, are two proof from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people. 'He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me. And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying.' Said He: "We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail.' (Verses 29-35)

Before we discuss this episode, we need to reflect a little on what God intended for Moses in those ten years, and the purpose behind his journeys away from and back to Egypt. We note that it was God's hand that planned the way Moses' life should unfold, step by step, right from the time he was a suckling newborn. It ensured that he was cast in the river so that Pharaoh's household should pick him up. It endeared him to Pharaoh's wife so that he was brought up in his enemy's home. It then made him enter the city at a time when its people were unaware of him, only to kill one of its people. It then sent him a believer from among Pharaoh's own household to warn him to leave the city. It then took care of him along the desert road to Madyan, when he travelled suddenly, alone and ill prepared. It took him to the old man where he stayed for ten years before returning to Egypt to receive his mission. We, thus, witness a long line of care, instruction and the gaining of experience before Moses is called and assigned his mission. His experience included being loved and pampered, spontaneous retaliation as a result of prolonged pressure, regret and repentance, being in fear for his life and chased, finding himself a lonely and hungry stranger, serving others as a shepherd after having lived in a palace, along with a multitude of small experiences, varied feelings, thoughts and understanding in addition to what God bestowed on him of knowledge and wisdom on reaching his prime.

Preparation for a Difficult Mission

To be entrusted with a divine message is a hard and multi-faceted task. The one so assigned needs a wealth of experience, understanding, knowledge and refinement in practical matters. They also need God's special favours, His revelations and directives.

Apart from the message of Islam given to Muhammad (peace be upon him), Moses' message is perhaps the hardest assigned to any prophet. He was sent to Pharaoh, the most tyrannical ruler on earth at the time. Pharaoh was also head of the

longest established monarchy, and the most advanced civilization. Furthermore, he was a ruler that demanded to be worshipped by all his subjects.

Moses was sent to rescue a community that had long been humiliated, and who had long accepted humiliation as their lot. Humiliation corrupts human nature, obliterating its good, beautiful aspects and making what is rotten, filthy and decadent appear acceptable. To rescue such a community was a tough assignment.

Moreover, the people to be addressed by his message had deviated from their old faith. Their hearts were neither free to readily accept the new faith, nor could they conform to their original faith. Addressing such people would be difficult, made all the more so by the numerous deviations and innovations they had introduced over several generations.

In short, Moses was given the mission of rebuilding a nation, or, indeed, to build it from scratch. With his message, the Children of Israel became, for the first time, a separate community, with a special way of life, implementing a message.

Perhaps this is why the Qur'ān attaches such importance to this story. For it provides a complete example of building a nation on the basis of faith. We see all the internal and external difficulties, deviations and other impediments that stand in its way.

The ten years Moses spent in Madyan served as a learning period, separating the palace life Moses was used to during his childhood, and the hard life awaiting him as he advocated his message. Palace life has its own atmosphere and traditions. It imbibes influence on the people enjoying its comforts, even though they may be exemplary in their understanding, awareness and knowledge. Delivering a message from God requires that the messenger deal with all people, rich and poor, affluent and deprived, clean and dirty, refined and rough, good-natured and evil, strong and weak, patient in adversity and impulsive, etc. Poor people have their own habits in the food they eat, in their clothing, walking, concept of life, understanding of events, vision of life, talking and in the expression of their emotions. Such habits cannot easily be accepted by those who are accustomed to palatial splendour. The poor may be full of goodness, ready to accept faith and implement it, but the rich and privileged may find it very difficult to deal with the poor because they cannot accept the latter's physical appearance and habits.

A divine message imposes certain standards of dedication coupled with a hard life. The rich may be prepared to sacrifice a life of ease, comfort and plenty, but they are rarely able to withstand hardship and deprivation for long. Therefore, God willed to reduce the standard of plenty Moses was used to, placing him instead in a community of shepherds so as to feel God's grace. In this way, he would know what it was to experience fear and hunger, and what it means to have to work for a living.

Furthermore, he would no longer feel any revulsion towards the poor, with their habits, manners and naivety. Just as he was thrown onto the water's ripples when he was a baby, now he is thrown into the sea of life in order to equip him for his task.

When Moses had completed his training in a foreign land, God's hand directed him anew, returning him to the land of his birth, where his own community lived. It is there that he would start delivering his message. Beforehand, though, he must travel the same route he used during his flight from Egypt. Why should it be the same? His training had included knowledge of desert routes, this because he would be leading his people along the same route in obedience of God's orders.

Thus, he would not need to depend on others, not even a guide. His people needed such a leader to show them which way to go at every turn, after they had lost their ability to think for themselves. Long had been their humiliation and subjugation.

Thus we realize how Moses was reared under God's watchful eye, and how he received his life's education so as to be ready to shoulder the burden of his message.

A Call from on High

> *When Moses had fulfilled his term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire on the slope of Mount Sinai. So he said to his family: Wait here, for I perceive a fire. Perhaps I may bring you from there some information, or a burning brand from the fire so that you may warm yourselves.* (Verse 29)

What could have happened to Moses to make him return to Egypt when the terms of his contract with the old man were fulfilled? He had left it in fear, expecting death for his part in the unwitting murder of an Egyptian. What could have caused him to forget such danger when it was Pharaoh and his chiefs that wanted rid of him? It is the hand that guided his footsteps throughout his life. It might this time have guided him through natural feelings of nostalgia for one's home and people. It might have reduced his sense of danger to a minimum, so that he could now take up the mission for which he was created and prepared.

Anyway, we see Moses on his return journey to Egypt, with his family, in the dark of the night, having lost his way. It was a cold night, which made him pleased at the sight of fire in the distance. He headed in that direction to get some information or a firebrand. This, then, is the first scene in this episode.

The second scene tells us of the great surprise prepared for Moses: *"But when he came close to it, he was addressed from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree on the blessed site."* (Verse 30) We see him aiming towards the fire, and on the right bank of

the valley. From here on this site is blessed. The whole universe now echoes the sublime address Moses receives *"out of the tree'*, which might have been the only tree there.

Moses received the direct call: *"Moses! Truly, I am God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 30) He received it alone in a solitary valley, in the depths of night, but the whole universe responded, with the heavens and the earth reverberating it. We do not know how, or with which faculty or sense he received it, but he certainly received it with his whole being, as did the entire universe around him. He was able to receive it because he was reared under God's watchful eye until he was ready for this moment. The universe recorded this sublime address, and the site where it took place became blessed as God, in all His majesty, revealed His presence there. The valley became distinguished by this great event, and Moses stood there in the noblest position a human being ever stood.

God then continued to give His instructions: *"Throw down your stag?"* (Verse 31) Moses complied with the order, throwing down his staff. Only now it was no longer his staff but instead a writhing serpent, which was large in size but moving very fast: *"But when he saw it moving, as if it were a serpent, he turned and fled, with no thought of turning back."* (Verse 31) Moses was totally unprepared for this. Taken aback, he turned and set to flight. He did not even think of going back to find out what had happened to his staff, or to better see this preternatural happening. Such is the natural reaction of spontaneous people.

He then listened to his Lord's address: *"Draw near and have no fear! You are certainly secure."* (Verse 31) Again, we witness Moses experiencing fear and security in quick succession. Such contrasting emotions were indeed the essence of his life. In fact, this continuous interaction was deliberately instilled in him so as to counterbalance the Israelite's inactivity and habitual acceptance of their humble position. His spontaneity was part of what God granted him so that he could fulfil his role.

He is told to come near and to have no fear. Needless to say, a person whose every step is watched over by God will always be safe and secure.

"Now place your hand inside your garment, and it will come out [shining) white without blemish." (Verse 32) Again Moses did as he was instructed, putting his hand inside his garment's top opening. Drawing it out, he received yet another shock. His hand was now a shining white, though clearly healthy. Its original colour would have been rather dark, weathered by the sun and elements. This change of colour thus symbolized the clear truth: one supported by undeniable, irrefutable evidence.

Again Moses' spontaneous personality caught up with him as he trembled, struck with awe. But God's care was soon forthcoming, giving him another instruction so as to calm him down: *"Then draw your arm close to your side to allay your fear."* (Verse 32)

In the Arabic text, the word *janāh is* used to denote "side", giving the impression that he draws it over himself like a bird, to reassure himself.

So Moses has now been given clear signs, causing him fear at first before he was reassured. Now it is time he learned of what lay ahead of him: *"These, then, are two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his nobles. They are indeed wicked people."* (Verse 32) He is given a message to deliver to Pharaoh and his lieutenants, in fulfilment of the promise his mother was given when he was still a newborn baby: *"We shall restore him to you, and shall make him one of Our messengers."* (Verse 7) Despite the passage of many years, the promise has remained true, given by God who always speaks the truth.

Moses now remembers that he had killed one of Pharaoh's entourage and that he had to flee Egypt in order to save himself. As he was in the presence of his Lord who had honoured him beyond his wildest expectations, even to the point of meeting Him and being given clear signs, he felt the need to take precautions so that his message should not be brought to an abrupt end if he himself was killed: *"He said: My Lord! I have killed one of them and I fear that they will kill me."* (Verse 33)

He does not say this by way of apology, or to find a way out of his commission. He only wanted to ensure that the message of truth would be advocated should his fears be well-founded. This reflects his keen desire to fulfil his task; a desire that is in line with Moses' character as a man of strength, someone worthy of trust. He elaborates on his fears further: *"And my brother, Aaron, is better in speech than I am. So send him with me as a helper, so that he would confirm what I say, for I fear that they will accuse me of lying."* (Verse 34) Aaron is more eloquent and better able to defend the message. He can provide much needed support, and can succeed Moses should he be killed.

Moses is reassured and his request is granted: *"Said He: 'We shall strengthen your arm with your brother, and will endow both of you with power, so that they will not be able to touch you. By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail."* (Verse 35) It is not merely that God granted Moses' request, but that He also gave him a greatly reassuring promise, endowing both brothers with power. Thus, they would not face the tyrant Pharaoh relying only on their own devices. They would go equipped with a source of power that cannot be resisted by any earthly force. No tyrant possessed the means to harm them: "They *will not be able to touch you."* How could they when you enjoy God's protection that creates a fence around you? But the good news Moses is given goes further than this, assuring him and his brother of the eventual outcome; namely, that the truth will be triumphant. They have been given signs from God, and these signs are the means of victory: *"By virtue of Our signs shall you two and those who follow you prevail."* (Verse 35)

God's power is thus seen to intervene directly, shaping events, working through no earthly force as a cover. The victory will come about through none of the causes that are familiar to people. Thus a new code of values will be established in people's hearts based on faith and complete trust in God.

The Arrogant are Punished

This awesome scene is closed; time passes and the location changes; Moses and Aaron are now facing Pharaoh, producing God's clear signs, refuting the arguments of falsehood and explaining God's guidance. The end is shown: drowning in this present life, and a curse in the life to come. All is expressed in a series of short, concise verses:

> *When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: 'This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old. 'Moses replied: My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful.' 'Nobles!' said Pharaoh. 'I know of no deity that you could have other than myself. Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses; even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies.' Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us. And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea. Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers. And We made them leaders who called others to the fire. No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection. We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned.* (Verses 36-42)

The *sūrah* delivers its final strike very quickly, making no mention of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh's sorcerers: such details can be found in brief or in detail in other *sūrahs.* Here the *sūrah* moves from the denial of the truth by Pharaoh and his people directly to their destruction. It also includes what will happen to them in the hereafter. This quick movement is deliberate, so as to fit with the general drift of the *sūrah* emphasizing God's direct intervention, through no human agent. Once Pharaoh is seen to be adamant in his rejection of God's message, his end is directly shown. No further details are needed.

"When Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old." (Verse 36) Pharaoh's words are exactly the same as those employed by the Quraysh idolaters in Makkah when the Prophet Muhammad called on them to believe in God: *"This is nothing but forged sorcery. Never did we hear of the like of this among our forefathers of old."*

(Verse 36) It is nothing more than futile argument when faced with the overpowering truth. It is the same argument whenever falsehood confronts the truth: an accusation of sorcery, and a rejection based on nothing other than that the whole thing was new, unknown to their forefathers. Indeed, they have no argument, and no basis for their stand. Hence, their vague statement that proves nothing.

Moses (peace be upon him) refers the matter to God, because in such a situation where no proof is being requested, it is better to be brief and let God judge between the two parties: *"Moses replied.. My Lord knows best who comes with guidance from Him, and to whom the future belongs. Never will the evildoers be successful."* (Verse 37)

This is a very polite answer, which makes an implicit, yet very clear statement about the outcome of all confrontations between truth and falsehood. His Lord knows well that he is truthful, following divine guidance. The future certainly belongs to the one who comes with guidance, while the evildoers will never gain the ultimate success. This is God's law that will never change, even though things may appear at times to move in some other way. Moses, like every prophet, puts this very clearly to people.

Pharaoh's response is evasive, boastful and sarcastic: *"Nobles! I know of no deity that you could have other than myself Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies."* (Verse 38) What a blatant lie Pharaoh utters: *"I know of no deity that you could have other than myself"* And his nobles receive such falsehood with humble acceptance. Pharaoh relies on the legends that circulated in Egypt at the time claiming that kings descended from deities. He also relied on brute force that did not allow anyone to think or speak out against him. Whilst others saw him as mortal like themselves, they nevertheless accepted his arrogance without question.

He then affects seriousness about wanting to find out the truth and making sure of Moses' God. Yet, in truth, he is only making fun of the whole issue: *"Well, Hāmān, kindle for me a fire [to bake bricks] of clay, and then build me a lofty tower, so that I may have a look at the god of Moses."* Moses says his god is in heaven, so I will go up into the sky to look at him. In the same tone of sarcasm he pretends that he has doubts about Moses and his statements, but nevertheless he wants to look and find out for himself: *"even though I am convinced that he is one who tells lies."* (Verse 38)

It is at this point in the exchange that the match with the sorcerers takes place, though it is not mentioned here. The *sūrah* instead proceeds straight to how Pharaoh met his end: *"Thus arrogantly did he and his hosts behave on earth, against all right, thinking that they would never return to Us."* (Verse 39) Given they thought they would never return, they behaved arrogantly, against all right, denying God's signs and

warnings. Hence, God's punishment was quick: *"And so We seized him and his hosts and cast them in the sea."* (Verse 40) Pharaoh was seized with force and cast into the sea as though he was a little stone. We note the contrast between Moses being cast into the river when he was a newborn baby and he finds in it a safe shelter, and Pharaoh, the tyrant king, being cast into the sea, only to be destroyed. Safety and security are ensured when one is on God's side, while fear and destruction are attendant with the other side. We note that in the Arabic text, the same word, *yamm,* is used for both river and sea as this signifies a great body of water.

"Look what happened in the end to those wrongdoers." (Verse 40) It is an end that is met in full view, so as to serve as a lesson and a warning for all who deny God's messages. It shows how God's power overwhelms tyrants and despots in no time at all, so as to make their end easy to describe in just half a line or even less.

Another glance and this whole world is passed by so as to present a picture of Pharaoh and his hosts on the Day of Judgement calling on people and leading them into hell: *"And We made them leaders who called others to the fire."* (Verse 41) Evil is the leadership, and evil is the call. *"No help will they ever receive on the Day of Resurrection."* (Verse 41) It is a defeat in this life and a defeat in the life to come, in fair requital for their aggression and transgression. But they will not only be defeated; they are cursed in this world and spurned in the next: *"We caused a curse to follow them in this world, and on Resurrection Day they will be among those who are spurned."* (Verse 42)

The Other End

The *sūrah* leaves out the entire history of the Children of Israel's departure from Egypt, and the events that followed, in order to mention Moses' lot after having shown us Pharaoh's:

> *And so after We had destroyed those earlier generations, We gave Moses the book providing insight for mankind, as a guidance and grace, so that they may reflect.* (Verse 43)

This is certainly a great favour given to Moses. His is an honourable bequest: a book revealed to him by God in order to give mankind new insight and guidance into what is right. Believers must, however, remember how God's power intervened to save the weak and overcome the powerful. They must reflect on how oppressors are destroyed and the oppressed avenged and given power.

Thus ends the story of Moses and Pharaoh as related in this *sūrah.* It makes clear that safety and security can only be achieved by being on God's side, while fear is always associated with moving away from Him. It also shows how God's hand

intervenes to challenge tyranny and overcome it, when its power seems irresistible. The fledgling Muslim community in Makkah needed to understand this concept and be sure of it, while the arrogant idolaters also needed to reflect on it. Moreover, this concept is needed whenever and wherever believers advocate the truth and tyranny stands in its way.

This is yet another example, then, of how the Qur'ān uses historical accounts as educative material, and also to establish certain facts and principles which need to be reflected upon.

2
The Truth Clear for All

You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. (44)

وَمَا كُنتَ بِجَانِبِ ٱلۡغَرۡبِيِّ إِذۡ قَضَيۡنَآ إِلَىٰ
مُوسَى ٱلۡأَمۡرَ وَمَا كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلشَّٰهِدِينَ
٤٤

But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life. Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers. (45)

وَلَٰكِنَّآ أَنشَأۡنَا قُرُونٗا فَتَطَاوَلَ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡعُمُرُۚ
وَمَا كُنتَ ثَاوِيٗا فِيٓ أَهۡلِ مَدۡيَنَ
تَتۡلُواْ عَلَيۡهِمۡ ءَايَٰتِنَا وَلَٰكِنَّا كُنَّا
مُرۡسِلِينَ ٤٥

Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out [to Moses]. Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect. (46)

وَمَا كُنتَ بِجَانِبِ ٱلطُّورِ إِذۡ نَادَيۡنَا وَلَٰكِن
رَّحۡمَةٗ مِّن رَّبِّكَ لِتُنذِرَ قَوۡمٗا مَّآ أَتَىٰهُم
مِّن نَّذِيرٖ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ
٤٦

[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, "Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among

وَلَوۡلَآ أَن تُصِيبَهُم مُّصِيبَةُۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتۡ
أَيۡدِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُواْ رَبَّنَا لَوۡلَآ أَرۡسَلۡتَ إِلَيۡنَا
رَسُولٗا فَنَتَّبِعَ ءَايَٰتِكَ وَنَكُونَ مِنَ
ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنِينَ ٤٧

the believers.' (47)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِنۡ عِندِنَا قَالُواْ لَوۡلَآ أُوتِيَ مِثۡلَ مَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰٓۚ أَوَلَمۡ يَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ مِن قَبۡلُۖ قَالُواْ سِحۡرَانِ تَظَٰهَرَا وَقَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا بِكُلّٖ كَٰفِرُونَ ٤٨

Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given?' But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: "These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other.' And they add: "We reject both of them.' (48)

قُلۡ فَأۡتُواْ بِكِتَٰبٖ مِّنۡ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ هُوَ أَهۡدَىٰ مِنۡهُمَآ أَتَّبِعۡهُ إِن كُنتُمۡ صَٰدِقِينَ ٤٩

Say: "Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true! (49)

فَإِن لَّمۡ يَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لَكَ فَٱعۡلَمۡ أَنَّمَا يَتَّبِعُونَ أَهۡوَآءَهُمۡۚ وَمَنۡ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنِ ٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ بِغَيۡرِ هُدٗى مِّنَ ٱللَّهِۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ٥٠

But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing. (50)

۞ وَلَقَدۡ وَصَّلۡنَا لَهُمُ ٱلۡقَوۡلَ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ٥١

We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect. (51)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ هُم بِهِۦ يُؤۡمِنُونَ ٥٢

Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it. (52)

وَإِذَا يُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِمۡ قَالُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦٓ إِنَّهُ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّنَآ إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ مُسۡلِمِينَ ٥٣

And when it is recited to them, they say: "We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we

submitted ourselves to Him.' (53)

These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. (54)

And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: "To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.' (55)

Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright. (56)

They say: "If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.' Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. (57)

How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. (58)

Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a

أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ يُؤْتَوْنَ أَجْرَهُم مَّرَّتَيْنِ بِمَا صَبَرُوا۟
وَيَدْرَءُونَ بِٱلْحَسَنَةِ ٱلسَّيِّئَةَ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَـٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا۟ ٱللَّغْوَ أَعْرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا۟
لَنَآ أَعْمَـٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَـٰلُكُمْ سَلَـٰمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَا
نَبْتَغِى ٱلْجَـٰهِلِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِى مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَـٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
يَهْدِى مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

وَقَالُوٓا۟ إِن نَّتَّبِعِ ٱلْهُدَىٰ مَعَكَ نُتَخَطَّفْ
مِنْ أَرْضِنَآ ۚ أَوَلَمْ نُمَكِّن لَّهُمْ حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا
يُجْبَىٰٓ إِلَيْهِ ثَمَرَٰتُ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ رِّزْقًا مِّن لَّدُنَّا
وَلَـٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِن قَرْيَةٍۭ بَطِرَتْ مَعِيشَتَهَا ۖ
فَتِلْكَ مَسَـٰكِنُهُمْ لَمْ تُسْكَن مِّنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ
إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ۖ وَكُنَّا نَحْنُ ٱلْوَٰرِثِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ مُهْلِكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ يَبْعَثَ
فِىٓ أُمِّهَا رَسُولًا يَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَـٰتِنَا ۚ وَمَا
كُنَّا مُهْلِكِى ٱلْقُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا وَأَهْلُهَا
ظَـٰلِمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. (59)

وَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَيۡءٖ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَزِينَتُهَاۚ وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيۡرٞ وَأَبۡقَىٰٓۚ أَفَلَا تَعۡقِلُونَ ٦٠

'Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? (60)

أَفَمَن وَعَدۡنَٰهُ وَعۡدًا حَسَنٗا فَهُوَ لَٰقِيهِ كَمَن مَّتَّعۡنَٰهُ مَتَٰعَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا ثُمَّ هُوَ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ مِنَ ٱلۡمُحۡضَرِينَ ٦١

Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us? (61)

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ أَيۡنَ شُرَكَآءِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ٦٢

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?'(62)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡقَوۡلُ رَبَّنَا هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ ٱلَّذِينَ أَغۡوَيۡنَآ أَغۡوَيۡنَٰهُمۡ كَمَا غَوَيۡنَاۖ تَبَرَّأۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَۖ مَا كَانُوٓاْ إِيَّانَا يَعۡبُدُونَ ٦٣

Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.'(63)

وَقِيلَ ٱدۡعُواْ شُرَكَآءَكُمۡ فَدَعَوۡهُمۡ فَلَمۡ يَسۡتَجِيبُواْ لَهُمۡ وَرَأَوُاْ ٱلۡعَذَابَۚ لَوۡ أَنَّهُمۡ كَانُواْ يَهۡتَدُونَ ٦٤

They will be told: "Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! (64)

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ مَاذَآ أَجَبۡتُمُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ ٦٥

On that day, He will call to them and ask: "What answer did you give to My messengers?' (65)

فَعَمِيَتۡ عَلَيۡهِمُ ٱلۡأَنۢبَآءُ يَوۡمَئِذٖ فَهُمۡ لَا يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ٦٦

But to them all information will be

فَأَمَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحٗا

blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. (66)

However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful. (67)

Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. (68)

And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. (69)

He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return. (70)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?' (71)

Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?' (72)

فَعَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونَ مِنَ ٱلْمُفْلِحِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

وَرَبُّكَ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ وَيَخْتَارُ ۗ مَا كَانَ لَهُمُ ٱلْخِيَرَةُ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ وَتَعَٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

وَرَبُّكَ يَعْلَمُ مَا تُكِنُّ صُدُورُهُمْ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

وَهُوَ ٱللَّهُ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ لَهُ ٱلْحَمْدُ فِى ٱلْأُولَىٰ وَٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۖ وَلَهُ ٱلْحُكْمُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ مَنْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِضِيَآءٍ ۖ أَفَلَا تَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلنَّهَارَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ مَنْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِلَيْلٍ تَسْكُنُونَ فِيهِ ۖ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

وَمِن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ

It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful. (73)

لِتَسۡكُنُواْ فِيهِ وَلِتَبۡتَغُواْ مِن فَضۡلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمۡ تَشۡكُرُونَ ٧٣

On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' (74)

وَيَوۡمَ يُنَادِيهِمۡ فَيَقُولُ أَيۡنَ شُرَكَآءِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ كُنتُمۡ تَزۡعُمُونَ ٧٤

We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: "Produce your evidence!' They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them. (75)

وَنَزَعۡنَا مِن كُلِّ أُمَّةٖ شَهِيدٗا فَقُلۡنَا هَاتُواْ بُرۡهَٰنَكُمۡ فَعَلِمُوٓاْ أَنَّ ٱلۡحَقَّ لِلَّهِ وَضَلَّ عَنۡهُم مَّا كَانُواْ يَفۡتَرُونَ ٧٥

Overview

The first passage related Moses' story with telling effects. The current passage begins with some additional comments concerning Moses before it picks up the main theme of the *sūrah* explaining where security lies and who should be in fear. It also portrays a number of scenes from the universe, as also from the Day of Judgement, which it addresses to the unbelievers who denied God's message and made false allegations against the Prophet. It tells them about their own situation after presenting certain aspects that confirm the truth of what God's Messenger tells them. It refers to some of the people of earlier divine religions who received this final message positively, recognizing its truth and believing in it. By contrast, the idolaters continue to deny it when it is meant to bring them God's mercy. They only need a little clear reflection to recognize this and he certain of it.

Confirmation of the Message

The first comment on Moses' story confirms the revelations being given to the Prophet. The Prophet was telling his people about past events in details that could not have been gathered except by an eyewitness. Yet, he was not there at the time. He learnt of these events through revelations bestowed on him from on high. This is only an act of grace meant to spare his people God's punishment for their idolatry.

Should such punishment befall them, they will surely cry out that they would have believed if only a messenger from God had been sent to them.

> *You certainly were not present on the western side of the mountain when We issued the Commandments to Moses, nor were you one of those who witnessed [those events]. But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life.* (Verses 44-45)

The mountain referred to is Mount Sinai, known as al-Tar, where Moses had his appointment with God after a certain period, given first as 30 nights, but then completed with 10 more, making the total 40 as mentioned in *Sūrah 7.* It was on this occasion that Moses received the full extent of his message as detailed in the tablets: these contain the divine law as delineated for the Children of Israel. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not present at this meeting so as to know all its details as outlined in the Qur'ān. Indeed, several centuries and many human generations separated him from it: *"But We raised up many generations, and long was their span of life."* (Verse 45) This clearly indicates that his knowledge of it was received from God who revealed the Qur'ān to him from on high. He is the One who knows all.

The Qur'ān also speaks of Madyan and Moses' sojourn there. Yet the Prophet was never at Madyan and it is only the Qur'ān that provides him with such detailed information: *"Nor did you dwell among the people of Madyan, reciting Our revelations to them. Rather, it is We who send messengers."* (Verse 45) It is God who chooses His messengers. It is also He who gives them information about past nations and communities.

The Qur'ān also describes in full detail God's address to Moses by the side of Mount Sinai and how he responded to his Lord: *"Nor indeed were you present on the slopes of Mount Sinai when We called out (to Moses]."* (Verse 46) Again, The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not hear this call and nor could he have recorded the details of this appointment as it took place. The fact that God related all this to him, which testifies to his honesty and the truth of his message, is an aspect of God's mercy extended to his people. He is, thus, able to warn them while earlier messengers were sent to the Children of Israel who lived in an area adjacent to Arabia. The Arabs had not been sent a messenger since the time of their first father, Prophet Ishmael: *"Rather, it is an act of your Lord's mercy so that you may warn people to whom no warner has come before you, so that they may perchance reflect.* (Verse 46)

It is certainly by virtue of an act of grace that God sends a messenger to warn and advise people. At the same time, it seals the argument against them. When they have received God's message, they cannot then argue that they were taken by surprise, or say that they had not received ample warning before receiving their punishment.

Indeed, the way they lived, associating partners with God and committing all manner of sin, deserves punishment. Hence, God wanted to leave them with no room for argument. He wanted to make them stand face to face with the truth, such that nothing could hinder them from accepting it and from becoming good believers:

> *[We have sent you] lest they say when a disaster befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, 'Our Lord! If only You had sent us a messenger, we would have followed Your revelations, and would have been among the believers.'* (Verse 47)

This is what they would have said had not a messenger been sent to them with sufficient proofs and signs to make them see the truth for what it is. Yet even when the Messenger came to them with the irrefutable truth, they still would not follow him:

> *Now when the truth has come to them from Us, they say: "Why has he not been given the like of what Moses was given?' But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given? Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other' And they add: 'We reject both of them.'* (Verse 48)

They would not admit the truth. On the contrary, they continued to give false excuses so as to justify their rejection. They also asked why this Messenger was not given the like of what Moses was given, referring to both the physical miracles and the tablets.

Clearly, their objections were dishonest. Hence, the Qur'ān puts the following question to them: *"But did they not deny the truth of what Moses was formerly given?"* (Verse 48) There were Jews in Arabia who had the Torah, but the Arabs neither accepted this nor believed in it. They were also aware that the Torah gives a clear description of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They also sought the advice of some followers of earlier religions asking them about Muhammad's message. In turn, those learned ones answered them that it was true, fully consistent with their own revelations. Yet still the idolaters would not accept such assertions. They claimed that both the Torah and the Qur'ān were magic; hence, each confirmed the other: *"Indeed they said: 'These are two kinds of sorcery, each supporting the other:' And they add: 'We reject both of them.'"* (Verse 48) It is all, then, argument for argument's sake. It has nothing to do with the proper pursuit of the truth, nor with proper evidence to confirm it.

Nevertheless, the Qur'ān takes a further step to put the truth before them. It says: If you like neither the Qur'ān nor the Torah, then show me a divine writ which

provides better guidance than these two books and I will follow it: *"Say: 'Produce, then, a Book from God which would offer better guidance than these two and I shall follow it, if what you say be true!"* (Verse 49) Nothing, then, could be fairer. Whoever rejects the truth after this is merely being obstinate, following his own desire with little concern about evidence to support his position:

> *But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims. Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God. Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing.* (Verse 50)

The truth is clear in this Qur'ān, and the argument Islam presents is clear and powerful. Anyone who knows Islam well but who still rejects it is only doing so because he prefers to pursue his own desires. There are only two ways: either commitment to the truth which breaks the grip of desire, and leads to submission and acceptance of the faith, or evading the truth and pursuing desire, which means rejecting the truth and denying faith. The unbelievers cannot present any argument on the basis of ambiguity, confusion or lack of proof. *"But if they do not respond to you, then know that they are following only their own whims."* (Verse 50) This is a fact that allows no argument as it is clearly stated by God. Those who do not respond positively to this faith pursue their own desire and self-interest. They have no excuse. They offer no sound argument as they turn away from the truth.

"Who could be more astray than one who follows his own whims without any guidance from God." (Verse 50) In this they are also transgressors and wrongdoers: *"Certainly God does not guide those who are wrongdoing."* (Verse 50)

The Qur'ān leaves no excuse for those who claim that they have not understood its message, or who claim that they do not comprehend Islam. Once this faith is presented and explained to them, all argument ceases and excuses are futile. The Qur'ān is indeed the epitome of clarity. No one denies it except those who are deliberate wrongdoers: they wrong themselves and are unjust to the truth. As such they do not deserve divine guidance: *"God does not guide those who are wrongdoing."* (Verse 50) As the message is given to them, the issues are set out clearly and no excuse can be made for turning away: *"We have indeed caused this word [of Ours] to reach them so that they may reflect."* (Verse 51)

Sound Approach to Truth

The *sūrah* now begins a new round, presenting the case of those who sincerely look for the truth and abide by it. They have clear minds, sound approach and

sincere intentions. These are a group from the people of earlier revelations who came to know of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān thus tells of how they approached it once they had heard it.

> *Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it, and when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him. These are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity, having repelled evil with good, and having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them. And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.'* (Verses 52-55)

Sa`īd ibn Jubayr mentions that these verses speak about 70 priests sent by Negus. When they met the Prophet he recited to them *Sūrah* 36, Yā Sīn, from start to finish. They were in tears as they listened to it and then immediately declared their belief in Islam. These verses confirm what they did.

Muhammad ibn Isĥāq reports in his biography of the Prophet:

> When the Prophet was still in Makkah, some 20 Christians came to him after they had heard about him in Abyssinia. They found him in the Mosque, and they sat with him asking him about his faith. A number of unbelievers from the Quraysh were sitting in their normal gathering places around the Ka`bah. When the Christians finished their questions, the Prophet called on them to believe in Islam and read some of the Qur'ān to them. When they listened to the Qur'ān, they were in tears. They immediately responded to the Prophet's call, declared their belief in God and that Muhammad was truly God's Messenger. They confirmed that he met the description they had of him in their Scriptures. When they rose to leave him, Abū Jahl and a number of the Quraysh unbelievers intercepted them, and reproached them, saying: "How ill advised you are! Your people sent you here to get information about this man; yet you hardly sat with him before you abandoned your faith and accepted his claims. We have never seen a more stupid delegation than yours.' Members of the delegation replied: "We wish you peace, and we will not engage in futile argument with you. We follow what we choose and you follow what you choose. We have not been slow to take advantage of the good that has been offered us.'
>
> It is reported that this Christian delegation was from the people of Najran. God knows best which report is more accurate. It is also stated that it is they that are referred to in the Qur'ānic verses starting with: *"Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it..."* (Verse 52) However, I asked al-Zuhrī

> about these verses and of whom they speak. He said to me: "I have often heard from our scholars that they speak of Negus [may God be pleased with him] and his men, as also the verses in *Sūrah* 5, The Repast, which read: *"You will certainly find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews, and those who associate partners with God; and you will certainly find that the nearest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, "We are Christians." This is so because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not given to arrogance. When they listen to what has been revealed to God's Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the Truth they recognise. They say: "Our Lord, we do believe; so enrol us among those who bear witness to the truth. How could we fail to believe in God and the truth that has come to us when we dearly hope that our Lord will admit us among the righteous?" And for this their prayer God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Such is the reward of those who do good; while those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are destined for the blazing fire."* (5: 82-86)

Whichever group of people these verses speak about, the Qur'ān is referring the unbelievers to a particular event which they knew about. It, thus, presents to them an example of how people with clear vision receive the Qur'ān. How they respond to it, recognize its truth and how it accords with their own Scriptures. They do not allow any impediment, whether desire or pride, to stand between them and its truth. Furthermore, they are prepared to put up with any difficulty the ignorant put in their way.

"Those to whom We sent the book before this believe in it." (Verse 52) This is one of the signs confirming its truth. All divine revelations are consistent. People who have been familiar with earlier revelations recognize the truth of the latest ones and are ready to believe in them, knowing that they all stem from God.

"And when it is recited to them, they say: 'We believe in it, for it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him.'" (Verse 53) The Qur'ān is so clear that it needs only to be read out and these people who have had some experience of the truth know for certain that it comes from the same source. Thus, they are reassured, knowing that it comes from none other than God: *"It is the truth from our Lord. Indeed, even before this have we submitted ourselves to Him."* Such submission to God is the central issue of every faith.

Those who have already submitted themselves to God, and who believe in the Qur'ān when it is recited to them *"are the ones who shall be given their reward twice for having been patient in adversity."* (Verse 54) It is their perseverance with self-surrender to God in its fullest sense, which is the meaning of Islam. It requires rising above desire and carnal pleasure, in order to follow the true path. They gain a double reward because of their perseverance in the face of real adversity. The most difficult

adversity is that of contending with desire, lust and deviation. They have shown their patience in all such circumstances, as well as perseverance in the face of the unbelievers' ridicule and hardship.

Good believers, however, do more than that for they also "repel evil with good'. This is indeed harder than perseverance in the face of physical and mental hardship. It means rising above personal pride and the desire to reply to ridicule and avenge physical injury. It also entails rising a step higher and adopting a benevolent attitude so as to answer what is foul with that which is decent. This is a height of greatness only achieved by good believers who feel that they are dealing with God, and who look for His acceptance. Hence, they forbear and persevere without losing their feeling of contentment.

"And having spent in charity out of what We have provided for them." (Verse 54) Here the *sūrah* mentions their being charitable with money after having emphasized their kindness to others. These two types of generosity, the personal and the financial, spring from the same origin, one which makes a believer rise over personal desire so as to treasure what is higher than earthly values. Both are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān.

People who are content with their faith also display another quality: namely, bearing patiently whatever hardship comes their way as a result of their self-surrender to God: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it and say: 'To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you! We will have nothing to do with ignorant folk.'"* (Verse 55) Frivolous, idle talk kills time without benefit or knowledge to heart or mind. It is the sort of vulgar language that leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. It is the same whether it is addressed to someone who is present or spoken about when that person is absent.

Believing hearts do not engage in such idle talk, nor do they listen to it. They are preoccupied with the requirements of their faith, revelling in its light and purity: *"And whenever they hear frivolous talk they turn away from it."* They are not provoked to reply in kind. They neither join those who are given to frivolous, idle talk nor enter into a slanging match with them. Instead, they leave malcontents alone, maintaining an attitude of decency and peace: *"To us our deeds and to you yours. Peace be to you."* (Verse 55) Thus, they observe the highest standard of propriety, saying a kindly prayer, but making clear that they do not wish to share in such behaviour: "We *will have nothing to do with ignorant folk."* (Verse 55) We do not wish to waste our precious time, match them in their idle talk, or even listen to it.

This is a shining picture of the sort of reassurance faith gives. It shows the believer rising above frivolity, yet still retaining a kind and charitable posture. It draws a clear line to follow for whoever wishes to adopt Islamic manners. There is certainly no

participation with the ignorant. There is only an attitude that overlooks their faults, and wishes them well even though they are out to offend.

Who Receives Guidance

The Prophet did not need to do more than recite a portion of the Qur'ān in his effort to present his faith to followers of earlier revelations and they accepted it. Yet with regard to his own people, the Prophet made every endeavour to help them see the light of faith, yet God did not open their hearts to it because of what He knew of them. The Prophet could not give guidance to everyone he wished. It is certainly God who guides those whom He knows to have the right attitude and mentality making them ready to accept the faith: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56)

It is reported in the two most authentic anthologies of *Ĥadīth* that this verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ţālib, the Prophet's uncle who looked after him and gave him much support, extending his protection to him against the Quraysh so that he could deliver his message in peace. Indeed, he put up with much pressure and hardship that involved the Quraysh's boycott of his own clan, the Hashimites, for three years when they were practically besieged in their own quarters. He did all this out of love for his nephew, Muhammad, and upholding the value of supporting one's kindred in the face of adversity. When his death was approaching, the Prophet urged him to believe in God and accept Islam, but God did not facilitate this for Abū Ţālib because of something God, in His wisdom, knew.

Al-Zuhrī reports on the authority of Al-Musayyib ibn Ĥazn al-Makhzūmī: "When it was clear that Abū Ţālib was about to die, the Prophet went to see him and found Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh ibn Umayyah ibn al-Mughīrah with him. The Prophet said to him: "Uncle! Say: "There is no deity other than God," and I will be able to give you good support in front of God.' Abū Jahl and `Abdullāh said to him: Abū Ţālib! Would you abandon the religion of `Abd al-Muţţalib, your father?' The Prophet continued to press him while the two unbelievers urged him to stick to his father's faith. The last thing he said was: "I follow `Abd al-Muţţalib's faith.' He refused to say: "There is no deity other than God.' The Prophet said: 'I will certainly pray for your forgiveness unless I am ordered not to do so.' God later revealed the verse that says: *"It is not for the Prophet and the believers to pray for the forgiveness of those who associate partners with God, even though they may be their close relatives."* (9: 113) In reference to Abū Ţālib, He also revealed the verse that says: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56) [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Muslim also gives another version on the authority of Abū Hurayrah: 'When

death was approaching Abū Ṭālib the Prophet said to him: "Uncle! Say, "There is no deity other than God,' and I will be your witness to it on the Day of Judgement." He said: "If it was not for my fear that the Quraysh will shame me saying that it is only for the fear of death that I said it, I would certainly have pleased you by saying it. I would not do so except to give you that pleasure.' Then the verse was revealed saying: *"Indeed, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love. It is God who guides whom He wills. He knows best those who are guided aright."* (Verse 56) Further reports by Ibn `Abbās, Ibn `Umar, Mujāhid, al-Sha`bī and Qatādah confirm that the verse was revealed in reference to Abū Ṭālib and that the last he said was: "I follow `Abd al-Muṭṭalib's faith.'

It is amazing just how serious and strict this religion of Islam is. Abū Ṭālib was the Prophet's uncle. He had supported and protected him against all who tried to harm him. Yet he was not to be one of the believers. This despite his great love of the Prophet and the Prophet's reciprocation of that love. Nor did the Prophet's desire that his uncle accept Islam make any difference. The point is that Abū Ṭālib gave all that he did to the Prophet out of paternal love and a sense of commitment to his kindred. Faith and its ties did not come into it. God was certainly aware of his motives; so he did not facilitate for him what the Prophet dearly wished. Thus, this aspect of guidance was not part of what the Prophet could have. It belongs to God's will and His evaluation of the situation. The Prophet's task is to deliver his message. Advocates of Islam in subsequent generations can only advise people. As for people's hearts, these belong to God. Whether a person chooses guidance or error depends on what God knows of their feelings and what is in their hearts.

Absurd Fears

The *sūrah* then mentions what they said to the Prophet by way of justifying their negativity to his message. Basically, they would lose their power *vis-a-vis* neighbouring Arab tribes which revered the Ka`bah, honoured its custodians and venerated its idols. Those tribes would collaborate against them, or perhaps other enemies from outside Arabia would drive them away from their land as they could no longer rely on support from neighbouring tribes. The Qur'ān clearly shows them where security lies and what they should fear, citing both their history and their current state of affairs. This follows what was stated earlier in the *sūrah* about Moses and Pharaoh. It takes the unbelievers on a further round showing them the true causes of ruin, not least ingratitude for God's blessings, denying His messengers, and turning a blind eye to His signs. This is followed by further verses that clearly outline true values. Thus, this present life, with all its pleasures, appear infinitesimal when compared to what God has in store for those who truly believe:

> *They say. 'If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land.' Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us? But most of them have no knowledge. How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs. Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing. Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason? Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us?* (Verses 57-61)

Theirs is a superficial outlook, evaluating matters by earthly standards. That is why the Quraysh imagined, as many other people do, that following the guidance God has given exposes them to danger and tempts their enemies to attack them. They think it will deprive them of support and bring about their ruin: *"They say: If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) They do not deny that what the Prophet advocated is proper guidance, but they fear their enemies will tear them away from their land. They forget God, the only One who provides support and protection. They overlook the fact that no force on earth can overcome them when they enjoy God's support, and none can give them victory should God withdraw His support from them. Faith has just simply not touched their hearts. Had it done so, they would have had a different measure with which to appraise hostile forces and powers. Indeed, they would have had a completely different outlook, realizing that true security is found in enjoying God's support, and that fear results from lack of His guidance. For certain, following God's guidance is directly linked with real power and dignity. This is neither myth nor something said to comfort and reassure people. It is a profound truth which ensues from following God's guidance. For this brings people into harmony with the laws that govern the universe and all powers operating in it. It enables them to make use of such powers for the benefit of mankind. It is God who has created the universe and set in operation all its laws. Those who follow God's guidance can only derive strength from all this.

Where Real Security Lies

The guidance provided by God lays down a perfect and practical way of life. When it is implemented, it achieves victory on earth, in addition to leading to

happiness in the life to come. Its great distinctive feature is that it allows for no separation between what promotes happiness in this life and what achieves it in the life to come. It does not negate man's interest in this world for the sake of the world beyond. It joins them together to achieve goodness in the heart, society and life as a whole. Thus, this present life is seen as the time for planting while the next life is the time for harvesting. This can only be achieved through following divine guidance and addressing all actions to God, aiming to earn His pleasure.

Every time a community followed God's guidance, He ultimately gave it power, security and sovereignty. This after it completed its preparations to shoulder the trust of being in charge. This is a law that has never failed.

Many are those who fear the consequences of implementing divine law and following God's guidance. They fear the hostility and the scheming of those who are hostile to divine faith, the collaboration of enemy powers and their economic and general sanctions. But all these fears are based on myth, just like those of the Quraysh when they said to the Prophet: *"If we were to follow the guidance along with you, we would be torn away from our land."* (Verse 57) When those very people eventually embraced God's guidance and implemented its rules, they were able to extend their authority over vast areas to the east and the west in less than a quarter of a century.

At the time, God gave them an answer that demonstrated the fallacy of their excuses. Who had given them security, and placed the Sacred Mosque in their land? Who was it who had made people from all over the world yearn to visit their land? Such visitors brought with them all manner of fruit and goods, presenting them in this sacred land while they were produced in unfamiliar areas and in different seasons.

"Have We not given them a secure sanctuary to which are brought the fruits of all things, as a provision from Us." (Verse 57) How could they fear being overpowered when they follow divine guidance. Is it not God who established the Sacred Mosque for them by the efforts of their first father, the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him)? Is it logical that the One who gave them security when they disobeyed Him would then leave them to be torn apart when they do what pleases Him? *"But most of them have no knowledge."* (Verse 57) They do not know where security lies and where fear comes from. They do not know that everything is determined by God Almighty.

If they really want to be spared aggression and loss of their lands, then they should avoid the causes of ruin: *"How many a community that exulted in its life [of ease and plenty] have We destroyed. The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited. It is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58) To be ungrateful and show no thanks for God's blessings is the reason that causes people's ruin. The Quraysh had been given this sanctuary where they lived. They should beware of remaining ungrateful. If they

continue so doing, they will leave themselves open to God's punishment. They, thus, run the risk of being destroyed like the dwellers of those cities which they knew, the dwellings of destroyed communities which remain uninhabited: *"The dwellings they left behind were but scarcely inhabited."* (Verse 58) Their houses are still standing, telling of what happened to the people who took God's blessings for granted, never giving due thanks for them. They perished, leaving no offspring to inherit them. Thus, *"it is We who are the only heirs."* (Verse 58)

Yet God did not destroy those ungrateful communities without first sending a messenger to recite to them His revelations. This is the law to which He has committed Himself as an act of mercy: *"Your Lord would never destroy a community without first sending them a messenger who would recite to them Our revelations. Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 59) The purpose behind sending a messenger into the main population centre is that it becomes a focal point from which the divine message is delivered to neighbouring areas and then further a field. Thus, no one will have the excuse of not knowing the divine message. The Prophet was sent to Makkah, the main centre in Arabia, warning its people of the fate that befell earlier communities which denied their messengers after receiving God's warnings. *"Never would We destroy a community unless its people are intent on wrongdoing."* Such people continue to deny God's revelations and messages, even though they know them to be true.

Yet all the enjoyments, pleasures, possessions and wealth that is available in this life, as well as the land where God has granted them power, the produce He has given them and all that mankind has ever enjoyed throughout life on earth is all but scanty when measured against what God has in store: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. Will you not use your reason?"* (Verse 60)

This is the ultimate valuation. It applies not only to what they fear to lose of possessions, land or security, or to what God grants them of power, riches and enjoyment, or to what He gives to different people to enjoy. It is the ultimate valuation of all that this life brings, even when it is in its perfect state and made to last without interruption or consequences. It is all part of *"the enjoyment of life in this world and for its embellishment."* It counts for little when compared with that which God has. For that is by nature *"much better and more enduring."* Hence the question is asked: *"Will you not use your reason?"* Comparing the two necessitates sound reasoning that knows the nature of both types. Hence the verse ends with this question. It alerts its addressees to the need to use their reason.

The round thus concludes with setting the two lives side by side, giving everyone the ability to choose: *"Is the one to whom We have given a goodly promise which he shall certainly see fulfilled comparable to one whom We have given much of the enjoyment of this*

world but who, on Resurrection Day, will be one of those brought before Us?" (Verse 61) On the one side we see those given a good promise by God and they find it on the Day of Judgement to be true. On the other, are those who took all the enjoyment life in this world could give, little and short as it is. They are forcibly brought forth on the Day of Resurrection for their deeds to be accounted for. The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are forced to come forward, afraid, dreading the outcome of the reckoning.

This is indeed the final word in reply to their earlier excuses expressing their fear that they will lose their land if they follow divine guidance.

Even if this were to come about, it would still be better than being forcibly brought before God for reckoning and reward. For, following divine guidance brings security and power on earth and rich reward in the hereafter. It is only those who are totally oblivious of the true nature of power in the universe, who are unaware of where security lies and what causes fear that abandon divine guidance. They are the losers who make a poor choice. They cannot avoid their inevitable ruin.

Disclaimers Availing Nothing

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round in which it portrays certain images of the Day of Judgement. It shows us the inevitable end to which associating partners with God leads:

> *On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' Those against whom the word [of judgement] has come to pass will say: "Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped.' They will be told: 'Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners,' and they will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them. They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]. If only they had been open to guidance! On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'What answer did you give to My messengers?' But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions. However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful.* (Verses 62-67)

The first question is one of rebuke: *"Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?"* (Verse 62) God certainly knows that such alleged partners are not to be found on that day, and that those who made the claims about their alleged status know nothing about them, they cannot even reach them. The question is asked so as to disgrace them. Therefore, those who are asked will give no answer, because no

answer is needed or expected. They only try to exonerate themselves for having led others astray, preventing them from following divine guidance, as the elders of the Quraysh used to do with their subordinates. They will say: *"Our Lord! Those whom we have led astray, we only led them astray as we ourselves had gone astray. We now disown them before You. It was not us that they worshipped."* (Verse 63)

We did not force them into error, nor had we any power over their hearts. They went astray knowingly and by choice, just like we did. *"We now disown them before you,"* having had nothing to do with the crime of leading them astray. *"It is not us that they worshipped."* They worshipped idols, statues and other creatures. As for us, we did not present ourselves to them as deities, nor did they address their worship rituals to us.

This attempt at diverting the questions will not, however, benefit them. They are forced back to the central point, which is the farce of associating partners with God: *"They will be told: Call on those you alleged to be [God's] partners."* (Verse 64) *If* those alleged partners can do any good, now is the time to call on them. Hence, they are urged to appeal to them to come to their help. In their misery, they know all too well that calling on them is futile. But they have no choice but to do as they are told: *"They will call to them, but the latter will not respond to them."* (Verse 64) Nothing else was expected and so the unbelievers are humiliated: *"They will then see the suffering [that awaits them]."* (Verse 64) They see it in this dialogue, just as they see it before them. Their inevitable end is one of great suffering.

When the image we see is at its climax, they are shown the guidance they continued to reject. This is the dear wish of anyone in that position on that great day. Guidance is available to them in this life if they will only take it up: *"If only they had been open to guidance!"* (Verse 64)

They are immediately returned to that dreaded scene: *"On that day, He will call to them and ask: What answer did you give to My messengers?"* (Verse 65) God certainly knows how they answered His messengers, but the question is put to them as a form of rebuke. In their state of total loss, they have no answer to give: *"But to them all information will be blotted out and they will not even ask any questions."* (Verse 66) For *"blotted out"* the Arabic text uses the word *`amiyat,* which denotes blindness. Indeed, it imparts an air of non-seeing to the whole scene. It is as if all information has been blinded and cannot reach them, leaving them with nothing. They can neither ask nor answer any questions. They remain silent, totally lost.

"However, anyone who repents, believes and does righteous deeds may well be among those who are successful." (Verse 67) This is the opposite image. At the moment the unbelievers are at the height of their distress, the *sūrah* depicts the person who repents of his sins, believes in God and does righteous deeds. This is the person who

hopes to be successful. The choice is open to all and the time is there to make such a choice.

Where Praise Belongs

The *sūrah* makes it clear that everything is subject to God's will and His choice. It is He who creates and knows everything. To Him all matters of this life and the life to come are referred. All praise belongs to Him and His is the judgement on anything in this life. For to Him is the eventual return. They cannot choose for themselves or for anyone else. It is God who creates and chooses what He pleases:

> *Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases. Never can they have such choice. Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners. And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open. He is God, other than whom there is no deity. To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last; with Him rests all judgement, and to Him you shall all return.* (Verses 68-70)

These verses are stated by way of comment on those that precede them. Verses wherein the unbelievers state their fear about losing their land should they accept the guidance the Prophet presents, and concluding with their position on the Day of Judgement when they face the reckoning and have to answer for their idolatry and erring ways. These comments clearly state that they do not have a choice between security and fear. They also re-emphasize God's oneness and that all matters are returned to Him.

"Your Lord creates and chooses whatever He pleases." (Verse 68) This is a fact people often forget or overlook. Indeed, God creates what He is pleased to create. No one can suggest anything to Him, whether increase or decrease in His creation. No one can introduce any amendment or modification on what He creates. He is the One who chooses whatever and whomever He pleases for the fulfilment of the functions, actions and duties He determines. No one can suggest to Him any candidate, or course of action to follow. None can propose to Him any statement or move. *"Never can they have such choice,"* whether in what relates to themselves or to anyone else. Everything large or small belongs to God alone.

If only this fact was established in people's minds and hearts, they would never feel frustrated. They would neither be elated with anything they receive nor be distressed by anything they miss out on. The choice is not theirs to make; it is God who chooses.

However, this does not mean that they should stop thinking or acting as they

wish. It simply means that they should accept what happens after they have done their best to consider, reflect, plan and act. They should accept it willingly. All they have to do is their utmost, leaving the results to God.

The unbelievers used to allege that God had partners when God alone is the Creator who chooses everything. He has no partner who has any share in His creation or in what He chooses: *"Limitless is God in His glory and exalted is He above all those they associate with Him as partners."* (Verse 68)

"And your Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they bring out into the open." (Verse 69) He requites them according to what He knows of their situation, choosing for them what they deserve, be it truth or error.

"He is God, other than whom there is no deity." (Verse 70) No partner does He have either in His creation or His choice. *"To Him all praise is due at the first and at the last."* (Verse 70) Praise is due to Him for His choices, blessings, wisdom, planning, justice, grace and mercy. He alone deserves all praise. *"With Him rests all judgement."* (Verse 70) His judgement is passed on all His servants, with none able to change any part of what He judges. *"And to Him you shall all return."* (Verse 70) He then makes His final judgement on all.

Thus the *sūrah* gives us a feeling that God's overpowering will is supreme throughout the universe. He is fully aware of everyone's situation, whether hidden or open. Nothing is hidden from Him. To Him all shall return. How can they, then, associate partners with Him when they are under His control?

A Different Universe

The *sūrah* then takes the unbelievers on yet another round presenting them with scenes of the universe. In these, they are shown to remain oblivious to what God chooses for them and their life. It alerts them to two great universal signs, the night and the day, and the secrets they involve of what God chooses for His servants:

> *Say: "Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?' Say: 'Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?' It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful.* (Verses 71-73)

Because of their long familiarity with the succession of night and day, which are

sometimes called in Arabic, "the two new ones', people forget their ever-renewing status. Rarely do they admire the sunrise or sunset, and only rarely do they reflect thoughtfully on the spreading of the day or the darkening that ushers in the night. They do not reflect on the act of grace that brings their succession with all that it involves of mercy and life renewal. The Qur'ān alerts them from the long familiarity that blunts their senses and invites them to reflect on these great universal scenes. It presents them with the possibility of either the night or the day lasting forever, and the terrible consequences of either eventuality. It is a fact that people seldom appreciate things until they lose them or fear that possibility.

"Say: Have you considered if God were to make the night perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you light? Will you not, then, listen?" (Verse 71) People miss the light of day when the winter nights become a little longer, and cannot wait for the bright sun when it disappears for a few hours behind clouds. What will they do then if they lose its light completely, with the night stretching perpetually over their world? This question supposes that they will remain alive in such an eventuality, when all life is in peril unless daylight is forthcoming.

"Say: Have you considered if God were to make the day perpetual over you, without break, till the Day of Resurrection, is there any deity other than God that could bring you a night in which to rest? Will you not, then, see?"[12] (Verse 72) People look for the shade when the hours of day stretch and become very hot, and they look forward to the coming of the night when the days stretch longer in the summer. They enjoy their repose and rest in the night. All creatures need the night when they can renew the energy they spend during the day. What would happen to them then, should they remain alive, if the day were endlessly perpetuated until the Day of Judgement? Indeed, all life could perish in a day that never ends.

Everything in this universe is determined according to a careful measure, and every little detail is planned. *"It is out of His grace that He has made for you the night and the day, so that you might have rest and seek to obtain some of His bounty, and that you may have cause to be grateful."* (Verse 73)

The night is for rest and repose, and the day for work and activity. It is all part of God's grace. Indeed everything people have is by the grace of God, so that *"you may have cause to be grateful,"* for the blessings and kindness He has granted you. One of these blessings is the succession of night and day. So also are all laws of nature which

[12] We should note that the verse speaking of the night being perpetuated forever ended with '*Will you not listen*'?, while the verse speaking of the other possibility of an endless day, concluded with '*Will you not see?*' Both are suitable qualities, because hearing is the important faculty at night, while during the day the primary faculty is sight. This is just an example of how the Qur'ānic style makes extensive use of harmony.

God has chosen to set in operation, reflecting His knowledge and wisdom.

Then follows a quick image of the Day of Judgement presented in a rhetorical question about those beings the unbelievers alleged to be partners with God. The *sūrah,* thus, confronts them with their false claims, showing them to be absolutely without substance:

> *On that day, He will call to them and ask: 'Where are those whom you alleged to be My partners?' We shall draw from each community a witness, and We shall then say [to the unbelievers]: 'Produce your evidence!' They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone, and all the falsehood they invented will forsake them.* (Verses 74-75)

This image of the day when they are called and the question about God's alleged partners was drawn earlier. It is now repeated to confirm it once more in connection with the scene that draws a witness from each community. This witness is the prophet sent to each community, and he will state what reception he and his message were given. The Arabic word *naza`nā,* which is rendered as *'We shall draw'* signifies a particularly strong movement. Yet the meaning intended here is that he is called out from among them, standing where he could see and be seen by them all. As they face this witness, they are required to produce their evidence for what they believed in. They have no evidence and cannot on that day persist in their denials. *"They will then come to realize that all truth belongs to God alone."* (Verse 75) Indeed, all truth in its complete purity belongs to God alone. *"And all the falsehood they invented will forsake them."* (Verse 75) Whatever falsehood they invented is useless. It cannot find them, nor can they find it at the time when they need it most.

Thus the comments on the story of Moses and Pharaoh are concluded. These comments took us on a long trip looking at hearts, souls, worlds, events and great scenes, moving repeatedly between the life of this world and the world beyond. It went far and wide in the universe, and deep into the soul, and far back in history, looking at the laws that govern life and the universe. Yet it always remained in full harmony with the central theme of the *sūrah,* and with the two main stories it relates: the one about Moses and Pharaoh and the other about Qārūn, or Korah. We have already looked at the first story and we will now look at the second.

3
Ungrateful for God's Blessings

Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: 'Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. (76)

۞ إِنَّ قَٰرُونَ كَانَ مِن قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰ
فَبَغَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلْكُنُوزِ مَآ إِنَّ
مَفَاتِحَهُۥ لَتَنُوٓأُ بِٱلْعُصْبَةِ أُو۟لِى ٱلْقُوَّةِ إِذْ
قَالَ لَهُۥ قَوْمُهُۥ لَا تَفْرَحْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْفَرِحِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' (77)

وَٱبْتَغِ فِيمَآ ءَاتَىٰكَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلدَّارَ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ ۖ
وَلَا تَنسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ
وَأَحْسِن كَمَآ أَحْسَنَ ٱللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَلَا
تَبْغِ ٱلْفَسَادَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.' Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins. (78)

قَالَ إِنَّمَآ أُوتِيتُهُۥ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عِندِىٓ ۚ أَوَلَمْ
يَعْلَمْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ أَهْلَكَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦ
مِنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ مَنْ هُوَ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُ قُوَّةً
وَأَكْثَرُ جَمْعًا ۚ وَلَا يُسْـَٔلُ عَن ذُنُوبِهِمُ
ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

فَخَرَجَ عَلَىٰ قَوْمِهِۦ فِى زِينَتِهِۦ ۖ قَالَ
ٱلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا
يَـٰلَيْتَ لَنَا مِثْلَ مَآ أُوتِىَ قَـٰرُونُ إِنَّهُۥ لَذُو
حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٧٩﴾

And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune!' (79)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ وَيْلَكُمْ
ثَوَابُ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ لِّمَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ
صَـٰلِحًا وَلَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلصَّـٰبِرُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.' (80)

فَخَسَفْنَا بِهِۦ وَبِدَارِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ فَمَا كَانَ
لَهُۥ مِن فِئَةٍ يَنصُرُونَهُۥ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا
كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself. (81)

وَأَصْبَحَ ٱلَّذِينَ تَمَنَّوْا۟ مَكَانَهُۥ بِٱلْأَمْسِ
يَقُولُونَ وَيْكَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ
لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقْدِرُ ۖ لَوْلَآ أَن
مَّنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا لَخَسَفَ بِنَا ۖ وَيْكَأَنَّهُۥ لَا
يُفْلِحُ ٱلْكَـٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: 'Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success.' (82)

تِلْكَ ٱلدَّارُ ٱلْـَٔاخِرَةُ نَجْعَلُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا
يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوًّا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَا فَسَادًا ۚ
وَٱلْعَـٰقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٨٣﴾

We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God- fearing. (83)

مَن جَآءَ بِٱلْحَسَنَةِ فَلَهُۥ خَيْرٌ مِّنْهَا ۖ وَمَن
جَآءَ بِٱلسَّيِّئَةِ فَلَا يُجْزَى ٱلَّذِينَ عَمِلُوا۟
ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ إِلَّا مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done. (84)

Overview

The *sūrah* opened with the story of Moses and Pharaoh showing the power of government and authority and how, when coupled with injustice, tyranny, disbelief and abandonment of God's guidance, it ended in failure and ruin. Now the *sūrah* tells us about Qārūn, or Korah, portraying the power of wealth and knowledge and how, when coupled with arrogance and ingratitude, this leads to the same end. In essence, the *sūrah* depicts those values that make wealth and luxury practically insignificant when compared with faith and righteousness, as also with moderation in enjoying life's pleasures without arrogance or corruption.

The Qur'ān does not specify the time and place where these events took place. It only tells us that Qārūn belonged to Moses' people and that he was unjust to them. Did this happen in Egypt before the Israelites left? Or was it after their departure but during Moses' lifetime? Or did it take place after Moses' death? There are some reports which suggest that Qārūn was Moses' cousin and that the events related in the *sūrah* took place during Moses' lifetime. Other reports add that he even wronged Moses and was party to a plot that sought to accuse Moses of adultery. Qārūn was to receive a bribe in return. God showed that Moses was innocent and allowed him to punish Qārūn, who was swallowed into the earth.

We do not need any of these reports, nor do we need to know the exact time and place of these events. The story, as told in the Qur'ān, is sufficient to serve its purpose and to establish its own values. If its time, place and circumstances could have benefited its purpose, the Qur'ān would have provided these details. Therefore, we will discuss here only what the *sūrah* imparts, without reference to other reports.

Sound Advice Met with Arrogance

> *Qārūn [or Korah] was one of the people of Moses, but he treated them unjustly. We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men. His people said to him: Do not exult [in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption.' Answered he: 'I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have.'* (Verses 76-78)

This is how the story begins, naming its main character, Qārūn, and his community, "*the people of Moses*", as well as the way he treated his people, which was

unjust. It also tells us right at the very start the reason for such injustice, namely wealth: *"We had granted him such treasures that their very keys would have been too heavy a burden for a band of strong men."* (Verse 76) It goes on to explain the events, statements and reactions involved.

Qārūn belonged to Moses' people. God had given him abundant wealth, described in the *sūrah* as *"treasures"*, a term that signifies a hoarded surplus of money which is taken out of circulation. Indeed the mere carrying of the keys to these treasures represented a heavy burden even for a band of strong men. It was because of his wealth that Qārūn treated his people unjustly. The *sūrah* does not specify the form of injustice dealt out by Qārūn, leaving it indefinite so as to include all types of injustice. He might have taken their land and property unfairly, as is often done by those who use power and wealth to deprive others of their rights. He might also have deprived them of their fair share in his property. God has given the poor their rightful share in the property of the rich, so that wealth does not circulate exclusively among the rich while all around them the poor are in desperate need. When this happens, corruption becomes manifest. Qārūn might equally have been guilty of other forms of injustice.

However, some in his community tried to stop such injustice, counselling him to maintain the path that earns God's pleasure. Thus, he would be able to enjoy his wealth and partake of the pleasures it provides, but in moderation and within reason. More importantly, this path requires wealthy people to watch God in all their actions, for it is He who granted them all they have. They too will have to account for their deeds on the Day of Judgement: *"His people said to him: Do not exult (in your riches]; for God does not love those who are exultant. Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world; and do good just as God has done good to you, and do not seek to spread corruption on earth; for God does not love the ones who spread corruption."* (Verses 76-77) This outlines the values and features that sum up the divine way of life and distinguish it from all other ways.

"Do not exult" in your riches nor be so proud of them as to forget the One who has granted you this blessing. Do not neglect to give due thanks. Do not treat your money as an object of extreme delight so that you become insolent and arrogant in your treatment of other people. *"For God does not love those who are exultant."* (Verse 76) His compatriots remind him of God and the fact that He does not love those who are infatuated with wealth, showing arrogance and using its power to humiliate others.

"Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your rightful share in this world." (Verse 77) Here we see the right balance that is characteristic of the divine way of life. It makes the wealthy look forward to

the life to come hoping to be among the successful on the Day of Judgement, without depriving him of his share of enjoyment in the present life. In fact, the divine system urges him to do so as a duty, so that he does not discard life's pleasures and look down upon the life of this world.

God has created the pleasures and luxuries of this life so that people may enjoy their share of these, and work towards obtaining them. Thus human life is set on the way to progress and man fulfils the task God has assigned him on earth. The only proviso is that in such enjoyment of pleasures they should seek the reward of the hereafter. Thus, the wealthy neither deviate from the road leading to heaven, nor neglect their duties as a result of their riches. When they seek the hereafter, their enjoyment of pleasure becomes a form of gratitude to God and proper acceptance of His blessings. Thus it is, in turn, a way to earn more reward. The divine way of life achieves harmony and balance in human life. It enables man to progress spiritually without suffering deprivation or wasting natural resources.

"Do good just as God has done good to you." (Verse 77) The money you have is a gift God has granted you out of his kindness. Hence, it should be received with gratitude and used for good purposes, and doing kindness to other people.

"Do not seek to spread corruption on earth." (Verse 77) Corruption takes many forms including injustice, indulgence in pleasure, paying no heed to God's guidance or to the hereafter, doing what causes envy and hatred, spending money wastefully and blocking its proper use. *"For God does not love the ones who spread corruption,"* in the same way as He does not love those who are exultant.

Such was the honest advice given to Qārūn by his people. Yet in one sentence his reply carried every meaning of corruption: *"Answered he: I have been given this wealth only by virtue of the knowledge that I have."* (Verse 78) I have got this wealth and amassed it through the knowledge I have; all by my own endeavour. So, why are you trying to tell me how to use what is my private property?

This is the attitude of one who chooses to be oblivious to the source of the blessings he has been given. He has been blinded by his wealth. Such people are common, seen in all societies. Many a rich person believes that his knowledge and effort are the only means by which he has amassed his wealth. Hence, he is not to be questioned about the way he uses his wealth, what he spends or for what purpose, whether it be for good or foul. No thought does he entertain of God or earning His pleasure.

Islam accepts private ownership and appreciates people's efforts in this regard, provided that they remain within the realm of what is permissible. While it does not belittle the importance of private effort, it stipulates a certain method of spending money just like it stipulates rules and methods that must be observed in acquiring it.

Its system combines balance and moderation. It does not deprive anyone of the fruits of their enterprise, but at the same time it does not approve either unrestricted indulgence or miserly hoarding. It gives the community its dues in such wealth, as well as the right to watch and monitor the methods of obtaining, investing, spending and enjoying wealth.

Qārūn, however, did not listen to his people, nor did he appreciate the blessings granted by his Lord. He did not abide by the divine method, but instead turned away arrogantly. Therefore, a warning was issued to him for his insolence and arrogance: *"Did he not know that God had destroyed many a generation that preceded him, and who were far more powerful and greater in wealth than he? The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78) If he believed himself to be powerful and rich, God had in the past destroyed communities that were far more powerful and wealthy. He should have known this, because it is such knowledge that saves man from destruction. Let him know, then, that he and all guilty people like him are worth nothing in God's sight. They are not even worth questioning about their sins. They are neither the arbiters nor the witnesses: *"The guilty are not questioned about their sins."* (Verse 78)

Dazzling Appearances

In just this first scene we see arrogance at its height. We also see sound advice ignored in favour of corruption and ingratitude.

The second scene shows Qārūn appearing before his people, decked out in all the splendour his wealth could afford him. Some of them are so dazzled by this that they express their keenest wish to have something similar. Envious, they believe that he has been given a great fortune. Others, however, listen to the voice of faith, rising above the lure of wealth and Qārūn's pomp. Speaking in full confidence, they remind the first group of the facts:

> *And so he went forth before his people in all his pomp. Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune! But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you!' God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.'* (Verses 79-80)

Here, we see some people infatuated with the luxuries that the present life can offer, ready to do what they can in order to have their share of it. Others feel that faith is a greater blessing, and hope for God's reward. Thus the value of wealth is set

side by side with the value of faith: *"Those who cared only for the life of this world said: 'Oh, would that we had the like of what Qārūn has been given! He is certainly a man of great fortune.'"* (Verse 79)

The luxuries and splendour that life can give have always captivated people so that they neither look beyond these nor seek any higher or nobler value. They do not ask what price the owner has paid for such luxuries, nor by what means he has obtained them. They covet it whether it is wealth, position or honour. They swarm like flies to it. It does not matter to them whether the price is too high, the method too wicked or the means too lowly.

By contrast, those who maintain their bond with God have a different standard of values by which they look at life. Their souls are too noble to let worldly considerations get the better of them. The dignity they feel as a result of their faith prevents them from yielding to the pressures exerted by others. Such people are the ones endowed with real knowledge and the right sense of proportion: *"But those who had been granted true knowledge said: 'Woe to you! God's reward is by far the best for any who believes and does what is right. Yet none can attain this other than those who are patient in adversity.'"* (Verse 80) God's reward is far better than all this pomp, and what God gives is better by far than all that Qārūn has. To have such insight into things puts people into a nobler category: they are the ones who persevere in adversity and resist temptation. They are the ones who remain patient despite being deprived of what they might wish for. When they prove their patience in the face of adversity and their perseverance in following the way God has laid down, He elevates them to a level that enables them to rise above all that life on earth can offer. Thus do they seek only God's reward, and with confidence and reassurance.

A Fitting End

When the attraction of material splendour and pomp is at its greatest, God intervenes in order to end the test and save the weaker elements of the community from such temptation. Thus arrogance is utterly destroyed in the third, decisive scene of this story:

> *Then We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling. He had none to give him support against God, nor was he able to protect himself.* (Verse 81)

In such a short sentence a huge event is described: *"We caused the earth to swallow him, together with his dwelling."* Thus Qārūn went into the earth over which his pride had swelled. He is shown to be weak and powerless, incapable of using his wealth or position to any advantage.

With him the severe test that had claimed other people was also brought to an end. The blow he received made them turn back to God, lifting the cover of error that had earlier blinded them. The final scene of the story is thus portrayed:

> *By the morning, those who but yesterday had longed to be in his place were now saying: Behold! It is indeed God who gives in abundance, or gives in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. Had not God been gracious to us, He might have caused the earth to swallow us, too. Behold! The unbelievers will not achieve success.* (Verse 82)

These very people are shown expressing their gratitude to God for not granting them what they had wished for only the day before. They are full of pleasure that God had not given them what He did Qārūn. They recognized that wealth is not an indication of God's pleasure. He gives in plenty or in small measure to any of His servants for reasons other than being pleased or displeased with them. Had wealth been evidence of God's pleasure, He would not have punished Qārūn so severely. Wealth is merely a test which can bring about a terrible end. They also realized that unbelievers will never be successful. Although Qārūn did not say anything to suggest that he was an unbeliever, nonetheless his arrogance and claims that his knowledge brought him all his wealth made them classify him as one. They saw that his end was one normally met by unbelievers.

The curtains are drawn with a victory for believing hearts achieved through God's direct will. Faith is seen to be far weightier than any worldly consideration. The comments that now follow are, therefore, most apt:

> *We grant that happy life in the hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing.* (Verse 83)

It was to the hereafter that the people endowed with true knowledge referred. They have the right sort of knowledge which gives things their proper value. The hereafter, then, with its high rank in the universal order, and its happy life is granted to *"those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption."* (Verse 83) No thought of arrogance is ever entertained by them. Nor do they seek to stress their own importance. Indeed such self-consciousness takes a secondary position, well below their consciousness of God and the supreme value they attach to the way of life He has laid down. They look at this earthly life, its concerns, values and standards with little interest. Corruption is far from their minds. Hence, they are given high rank in the hereafter: *"The future belongs to the God-fearing,"* who fear God and seek His pleasure, dreading to incur His wrath.

In the life to come reward for all actions is given in accordance with the rule to which God has committed Himself: a good action will be multiplied manifold and rewarded with that which is much better. Conversely, a bad action is given only its like. This is a gesture of God's grace to mankind: *"Whoever comes [before Him] with a good deed shall have far better than it; but anyone who comes with an evil deed will be requited with nothing more than the like of what they have done."* (Verse 84)

4
The Ultimate Return

He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return. Say: 'My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error.' (85)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِى فَرَضَ عَلَيْكَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لَرَآدُّكَ إِلَىٰ مَعَادٍ ۚ قُل رَّبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ مَن جَآءَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَمَنْ هُوَ فِى ضَلَـٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٨٥﴾

You could never hope that this book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace. Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. (86)

وَمَا كُنتَ تَرْجُوٓا۟ أَن يُلْقَىٰٓ إِلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَـٰبُ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۖ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ ظَهِيرًا لِّلْكَـٰفِرِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. (87)

وَلَا يَصُدُّنَّكَ عَنْ ءَايَـٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بَعْدَ إِذْ أُنزِلَتْ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَٱدْعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ ۖ وَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return. (88)

وَلَا تَدْعُ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَـٰهًا ءَاخَرَ ۘ لَآ إِلَـٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ كُلُّ شَىْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُۥ ۚ لَهُ ٱلْحُكْمُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

The Prophet and the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* has told its stories and given its direct comments on them both. Now it addresses the Prophet and the small band of believers who followed him when he was still in Makkah. This address is made when the Prophet had been driven out of his home town, was being chased by his people who wanted to kill him, and had not yet reached his new base, Madinah. He was at al-Juĥfah, close to Makkah where the

danger was very close. His eyes frequently turned to his home town which he so dearly loved. He only left it for the sake of his message. Otherwise, Makkah was the place where he had spent all his life, the place of his memories, and where his relatives lived.

In this desperate situation he is told: *"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return."* (Verse 85) God, who has given you the Qur'ān and the task of delivering His message will not abandon you, or allow the unbelievers to chase you out of your place and home town. He will not allow them to impose their will on you or to oppress the believers with you. He has made the Qur'ān binding on you so as to give you support through it at the time He judges to be right. If you are driven out today and being chased in all directions, you will certainly return with larger support.

God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to give Muhammad, His servant, this true promise at such a stressful time, so that he could go along his way comforted, confident and reassured by God's promise. He does not entertain the slightest doubt that God's promise will come true.

Indeed, God's promise applies to all those who follow the same way. Anyone who suffers hardship and adversity for God's sake and bears this with patience and perseverance will ultimately be given support against the oppressors. God will take over the battle on their behalf when they have given all that they can in fulfilment of their duty.

"He who has made the Qur'ān binding on you will surely bring you back to the place of return." (Verse 85) He had formerly returned Moses to the land from where he fled, and with his return he saved the oppressed community and destroyed Pharaoh and his noblemen. It was the God-fearing who ultimately triumphed. Hence, you also, Muhammad, should go along your way, leaving the question of judgement between you and your people to God Almighty: *"Say: My Lord knows best who has come with right guidance, and who is lost in obvious error."* (Verse 85) Leave the matter to God and He will requite both those who follow right guidance and those who remain in error.

That He had assigned the Qur'ān to you and made it binding on you was an act of mercy and grace. It could not have occurred to you at any time that you would be the person chosen to receive this trust. It is, indeed, a noble position to which you could not have aspired before it was granted to you: *"You could never hope that this Book would be conferred on you. But it came by your Lord's grace."* (Verse 86)

This confirms that the Prophet had no aspirations to be entrusted with God's message. He was chosen by God who creates and chooses as He pleases. To be a messenger of God is too high a position for any one to hanker after, unless God chooses that person and gives him the necessary preparations. It is an aspect of grace

given to the Prophet and made available to all humanity which is addressed by this message. It is grace that is granted to the chosen few, not to any aspirant. Many of the Arabs and Jews living nearby were longing for the last promised message to be given before the end of time. But God, who knows best to whom to assign His message, chose for it someone who never aspired to it. He knew that he was well prepared to receive its unfailing goodness.

His Lord bids him then not to lend support to the unbelievers. He warns him of allowing the unbelievers or anyone else to turn him away from God's revelations. He sets the pure faith based on God's absolute oneness against idolatry and idolaters.

> *Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers. Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high; but continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord. And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God. There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return.* (Verses 86-88)

This is the last word in the *sūrah* separating the way God's Messenger follows from that of the unbelievers. It clearly marks out the way for the Prophet's followers, which remains the true way until the Day of Judgement. It is the final word given at the time the Prophet was immigrating for God's sake, his journey separating two clearly distinct periods of history.

"Hence, lend no support to the unbelievers." (Verse 86) There can never be any mutual support or cooperation between believers and unbelievers when their two ways and codes are so widely different. One group is God's party and the other Satan's party. On what could they cooperate?

"Never let them turn you away from revelations after they have been bestowed upon you from on high." (Verse 87) Unbelievers always try to turn the advocates of faith away from their task, using all means and methods. The believers, however, always stick to their way, paying no heed to those who oppose them or try to divert them. They have God's revelations with which they have been entrusted.

"But continue to call people to [believe in] your Lord." (Verse 87) It should always be a direct, clear call that allows for no ambiguity or equivocation. It is a call to God, not to any bond based on national or narrow interests. It does not seek the fulfilment of any desire. Whoever wishes to adopt this message pure and simple should do so. Those who want something else should know that the way to that end is different.

"And never be one of those who associate partners with God. Never call on any deity side by side with God." (Verse 87-88) This rule is stated twice in succession. The first warns

against associating partners with God. The second warns against adopting any deity alongside God. It is this rule that separates clarity from confusion with regard to faith. It is on this rule that the whole structure of faith is based: its morality, values, duties and legislations. It is the pivot around which every directive and legislative order turns. Hence, it is always stated first.

Such emphasis is then repeated in a rather different way: *"There is no deity other than Him. Everything is bound to perish except Himself. With Him rests all judgement, and to Him you all shall return."* (Verse 88)

"There is no deity other than Him." No submission is made to anyone else. His is the only power and the only refuge. *"Everything is bound to perish except Himself"* Indeed everything else will die and perish: wealth, position, authority, power, life and its comforts, the whole earth, the heavens and all creatures in them, as well as the entire universe we know or do not know about. All will perish and only God, the Everlasting, will remain. *"With Him rests all judgement."* He judges as He pleases. No one is party to His judgement, and none can impede or abrogate His verdict. Whatever He wills shall be. *"And to Him you all shall return."* There can be no escape from Him or His judgement.

Thus concludes the *sūrah* that shows God's will taking direct action, protecting the divine message and destroying tyranny. It concludes with restating the basic concept of faith: God's oneness and His transcendent authority. Therefore, the advocates of the divine message should go along their way confident and reassured.

SŪRAH 29

Al-`Ankabūt

(The Spider)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation. Some reports suggest that the first 11 verses were revealed in Madinah, citing the fact that they mention *jihād* and hypocrites. However, we hold the view that it was all revealed in Makkah. It is suggested that the eighth verse was revealed in connection with the adoption of Islam by Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, as we will explain. There is no doubt that he adopted Islam in Makkah. Yet this verse is one of the 11 said to have been revealed in Madinah. As for mentioning *jihād,* this simply refers to striving against oppression. This is the type *of jihād* needed to ensure that we remain steadfast and do not allow oppression to force us to renounce our faith. This is clear in the context it occurs. As for hypocrisy, the *sūrah* simply describes a particular type of person.

The *sūrah* follows a single line from start to finish. It begins with three separate letters and follows these by speaking of belief and religious oppression. It also refers to the duties required by faith, which tests peoples' true metal. To believe is not a simple word that one says. Rather it means steadfastness in the face of adversity, and the fulfilment of one's duties.

Faith is, then, the *sūrah's* central theme. Shortly after its opening verses, it relates aspects about Noah, Abraham, Lot, Shu`ayb, the `Ād, the Thamūd, Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān, in quick succession, describing some of the impediments and tests that confronted the call to faith over many centuries. The *sūrah* then comments on these stories and the forces that appear through them to be lined up against truth, faith and divine guidance. It shows that all such forces are of little consequence. Indeed, God destroyed them all at the appropriate time: "We *took each one of them to task for their*

sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown." (Verse 40) The *sūrah* draws a comparison that shows the weakness and insignificance of such forces: *"Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41)

The *sūrah* then establishes a clear link between the truth contained in all the divine messages and that which is clearly seen in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It then asserts the unity between all these messages and that of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They were all given by God, and they all call on people in the same way, urging them to believe in God alone. The *sūrah* goes on to speak about the last revelations bestowed from on high and how the unbelievers received it, demanding miracles. They are not satisfied with this book, the Qur'ān, and all it contains of mercy and reminders to believers. Indeed, they hasten the coming of God's punishment, paying little credence to the fact that hell will encompass them. Their logic in all this is contradictory: *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.'"* (Verse 61); *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.'"* (Verse 63), and *"When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone."* (Verse 65) Despite all this, however, they continue to associate partners with God and to persecute the believers.

Within this context, the *sūrah* calls on believers to emigrate to some other place where they will enjoy security. They must not fear death, because: *"Every soul shall taste death."* (Verse 57) Nor should they fear that sustenance will not be available to them: *"How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you."* (Verse 60)

The *sūrah* concludes with praising those who strive for God's cause, reassuring them of support and continued guidance: *"But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good."* (Verse 69) Thus the end and the beginning are joined, both emphasizing the same point. The *sūrah's* consistency demonstrates how all its sections serve the same idea. All is focused around one central theme, faith.

The *sūrah* can be divided into three parts, all of which stress one theme. The first speaks of the basic nature of faith, the test that people have to pass, the different destiny of believers, unbelievers and hypocrites, and the fact of individual responsibility, which means that no one is answerable for anyone else's deeds or any part thereof: *"Most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions."* (Verse 13) The second part includes the stories we have already

mentioned, and the obstacles placed in front of divine messages and their advocates. It portrays them as insignificant when compared with God's might. It speaks about the truth inherent in the messages delivered by all prophets. It is the same truth that is inherent in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It all comes from God. The final part begins with a clear order not to enter into any debate with followers of earlier religions, except in accordance with what is best. It speaks of the unity of the divine faith throughout all generations, and the unity between earlier messages and Islam which is denied by unbelievers. It concludes with encouragement to those who strive for God's cause, reassuring them of God's support: *"God is indeed with those who do good."* (Verse 69)

From start to finish the *sūrah* strikes several strong notes on the meaning of faith and its nature, shaking people's hearts. In a most serious manner, it puts them face to face with the duties imposed by faith. The choice is either to fulfil these or to abandon them. The alternative is to be a hypocrite, which fact God will certainly unmask. The only way to describe these notes is to refer to the texts in which they occur. We will now discuss them fully at their relevant places in the *sūrah.*

1
The Inevitable Test

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? (2)

أَحَسِبَ ٱلنَّاسُ أَن يُتۡرَكُوٓاْ أَن يَقُولُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا وَهُمۡ لَا يُفۡتَنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars. (3)

وَلَقَدۡ فَتَنَّا ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبۡلِهِمۡۖ فَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ صَدَقُواْ وَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ ٱلۡكَٰذِبِينَ ﴿٣﴾

Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge! (4)

أَمۡ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعۡمَلُونَ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن يَسۡبِقُونَاۚ سَآءَ مَا يَحۡكُمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all. (5)

مَن كَانَ يَرۡجُواْ لِقَآءَ ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّ أَجَلَ ٱللَّهِ لَأٓتٖۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلۡعَلِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds. (6)

وَمَن جَٰهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَٰهِدُ لِنَفۡسِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَغَنِيٌّ عَنِ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did. (7)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَنُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنۡهُمۡ سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمۡ وَلَنَجۡزِيَنَّهُمۡ أَحۡسَنَ ٱلَّذِي كَانُواْ يَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (8)

وَوَصَّيۡنَا ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيۡهِ حُسۡنٗاۖ وَإِن
جَٰهَدَاكَ لِتُشۡرِكَ بِي مَا لَيۡسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ
عِلۡمٞ فَلَا تُطِعۡهُمَآۚ إِلَيَّ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَأُنَبِّئُكُم
بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ٨

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous. (9)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
لَنُدۡخِلَنَّهُمۡ فِي ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ٩

Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? (10)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ فَإِذَآ
أُوذِيَ فِي ٱللَّهِ جَعَلَ فِتۡنَةَ ٱلنَّاسِ كَعَذَابِ
ٱللَّهِ وَلَئِن جَآءَ نَصۡرٞ مِّن رَّبِّكَ لَيَقُولُنَّ إِنَّا
كُنَّا مَعَكُمۡۚ أَوَلَيۡسَ ٱللَّهُ بِأَعۡلَمَ بِمَا فِي
صُدُورِ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ١٠

Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites. (11)

وَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَلَيَعۡلَمَنَّ
ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ ١١

The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. (12)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ
ٱتَّبِعُواْ سَبِيلَنَا وَلۡنَحۡمِلۡ خَطَٰيَٰكُمۡ وَمَا
هُم بِحَٰمِلِينَ مِنۡ خَطَٰيَٰهُم مِّن شَيۡءٍۖ
إِنَّهُمۡ لَكَٰذِبُونَ ١٢

Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions. (13)

وَلَيَحۡمِلُنَّ أَثۡقَالَهُمۡ وَأَثۡقَالٗا مَّعَ أَثۡقَالِهِمۡۖ
وَلَيُسۡـَٔلُنَّ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ عَمَّا كَانُواْ
يَفۡتَرُونَ ١٣

Inevitable Tests

"Alif. Lām. Mīm." These are three of the separate Arabic letters that occur at the beginning of some Qur'ānic *sūrahs.* In our view, they are meant to alert the audience to the fact that such letters are the material from which the divine book given to the Prophet, i.e. the Qur'ān, is made. They are familiar to the Arabs who use them to compose whatever ideas they wish to express. Yet they cannot compose anything like this divine book, because it is of no man's composition; its author is God.

Sūrahs that start with such separate letters always speak about the Qur'ān, either immediately following these letters or later on, as is the case in the present *sūrah.* Hence, we read in its verses: *"Recite what has been revealed to you of the book."* (Verse 45) *"Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you."* (Verse 47) *"Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand."* (Verse 48) *"Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them?"* (Verse 51) The fact that references to the Qur'ān and its inimitable style are invariably made in these *sūrahs* confirms our view concerning these separate letters.

Immediately after the opening, the *sūrah* begins speaking about faith and the hard test believers are subjected to in order to make their belief a reality. It mentions that it is through such testing that true believers are distinguished from liars: *"Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars."* (Verses 2-3)

This is the first strong note made in the *sūrah,* given in the form of a rhetorical question about people's concept of faith. They often imagine that it is merely a word they utter: *"Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone?"*

Belief is not a mere word we say; it is a reality that imposes duties, a trust that carries requirements and a struggle that demands patience and perseverance. It is not enough that people should claim to believe.

When they make this claim they are not left alone. They are subjected to tests so as to prove their sincerity and true metal, just as gold is tested with fire so as to separate it from any cheap elements. The Arabic word used here for test derives from the root *fitnah,* which imparts exactly this sense of being subjected to a test with all that this implies.

Such tests to prove people's belief is a general and long established rule: *"We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars."* (Verse 3) God certainly knows what people harbour in their hearts before any test, but the test reveals, in

practice, what is known to God, yet hidden from human knowledge. He thus makes people accountable for what they actually do, not for what He knows of their reality. This is, in one sense, an act of grace, while in another, it is an act of justice. At the same time, it sets an edifying example for people so that they do not hold anyone accountable for anything other than what is clearly apparent of their deeds and what such deeds entail. They should remember that they cannot know what is in another's heart; only God knows that.

Let us now discuss the general rule that God has set in operation, one whereby believers are subjected to a test so as to distinguish those who are truthful from those who lie. Faith is the trust God has placed in this world of ours. It is borne only by those who are worthy of it, have the strength to bear it and are totally devoted to it. They must prefer it to their own comfort, safety, security, and all temptation. This trust entails being in charge of the earth, leading mankind along the way God has chosen for them, implementing His word in life. Hence, this trust is both noble and heavy. It is part of God's command, and as such, it needs a certain type of person to patiently endure adversity.

As part of the test, a believer is subjected to hardship by others. Believers often realize they have no one to support or defend them and that they lack the power with which to face tyranny. This is the immediate picture our minds see when tests are mentioned, but it is certainly not the hardest type of test. There are many different types of testing, some far more trying and difficult.

There is, for example, the test presented by family and loved ones. A believer may fear that the sacrifices he is called upon to make could put his family in a perilous situation, or that he cannot protect his loved ones. On their part, fearing for his life, his loved ones may call on him to compromise or to give up. They may appeal to him in the name of their close relation not to expose himself to destruction, or burden them with what they cannot bear. The *sūrah* refers to an aspect of such testing with parents, and this is very difficult to pass.

Another form of test is to see those who are deep in error and follow falsehood revelling in success, with the world at their feet, applauded by the masses, and with no obstacles in their way. Glory comes easy to them and everything in life is theirs to enjoy. Contrast this with the believer who finds himself ignored, unnoticed and undefended. Only a few people like him appreciate the value of the truth in which he believes, but none of these has any say in life.

Yet another form is to feel oneself alone in a strange environment. A believer looks around and finds everything and everyone swimming with the sweeping tide that runs contrary to the truth he knows, while he stands alone without support.

We see nowadays a different type of test in the form of communities and states

where vice is widespread, yet they reflect a progressive society and civilized style of life. In such communities, people find good standards of care and protection. Moreover, despite their turning away from God's path, such people are both strong and affluent.

There is, however, one test that is harder than all the rest. This comes from within, where the lure of desire, enjoyment and pleasure becomes very strong, or at least comfort and security appear too tempting. This makes following the line of faith difficult and the difficulty may be compounded by other obstacles which a believer may have to contend with in his community.

If time marches on under such conditions and God's support seems slow in coming, the test becomes even more difficult and harder to endure. Only those strengthened by God will remain steadfast. These are the ones who prove the truth of faith and can be given the great trust that God in heaven wants to place on earth.

What we have to understand is that God has no desire to put believers to such hard tests or cause them much suffering. It is all part of their preparation to take up the trust and fulfil its requirements. They must go through special preparations that can only be achieved through enduring real difficulties, withstanding pain and overcoming desires while being truly certain of God's support or His reward, long as the hardship may continue and severe as the suffering may be.

The human soul is tested with difficulties and hardships. It is thus purged of any vile influence. All its latent powers are thus mobilized and it acquires further strength and solidity. This is the effect of hardship on communities. Only the strongest remain steadfast. These are the ones who maintain the closest relation with God, and remain absolutely confident that the path of faith will inevitably lead them to one of the two goodly eventualities: victory or reward. To these the banner is eventually entrusted, and they are certainly worthy of it.

The trust they receive is very dear to them, particularly because of the high price they have had to give for it, enduring pain and suffering, and sacrificing much in its service. A person who gives much of himself and his comforts, who endures hardship and adversity will definitely hold dear the trust for which he has withstood so much. He will not abandon it easily.

As for the eventual triumph of faith and truth, this is something God has promised. No believer entertains any doubt that what God promises will certainly come true. If it is felt to be slow in coming, this must be for a particular purpose which will most certainly benefit faith and the faithful. No one is keener than God to protect His faith and the people who adopt it sincerely. Those believers who endure hardship should always bear in mind that it is sufficient for them to be the ones God has chosen to be entrusted with the truth. Indeed, God confirms that they have

strong faith, for He has chosen them to be tested. An authentic *ĥadīth* states: "The most severely tested are prophets, then the most pious people, then the ones closest to these, one degree after another. A man will be tested in accordance with his strength of faith. If he proves himself strong, the severity of his test is increased."

Those who subject the believers to hardship and act wickedly will not escape God's punishment, even though they may appear strong and victorious. This is again a true promise made by God: *"Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge!"* (Verse 4) No wicked or evil person should think that he can escape. If he does then his judgement is absolutely erroneous. God, who has made tests a general rule to distinguish true believers from false claimants, is the One who has also made punishment of the perpetrators of evil a general rule that never fails. This is the second strong note at the opening of the *sūrah,* one that balances the first.

Who Benefits by Striving

The third note the *sūrah* strikes is that of reassuring those who hope to meet with God and strengthening their bond with Him: *"Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 5) Those who dearly hope to meet God should rest assured. They should wait confidently for the fulfilment of His promise. They can look forward to it provided they do so with certitude. This is an inspiring image: a person of faith cherishing hopes and looking forward to the fulfilment of God's promise. His aspiration is answered with confirmation of its truth. This is followed by the reassurance that God is fully aware of all their hopes: *"He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 5)

Then the *sūrah* states to those believers who strive to fulfil the duties of faith, enduring all manner of hardship, that they only strive for themselves and for their own good. By doing so they have set their affairs on the right course. As for God, He needs no one: *"Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds."* (Verse 6)

It is true that God has tested the believers and required them to strive hard so that they could endure adversity with patience, but all this is for their own good. It has ensured their benefit both in this world and in the life to come. Striving, or *jihād,* reinforces a person's good elements, expands his horizons, makes him ready to sacrifice his life and possessions, as also enhances his best qualities and abilities. It does all this for the individual who strives, before it brings further benefits to the community of believers, improving its situation, establishing the truth within it, and making goodness overcome evil in its ranks.

"Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good." Let no one, then, stop

midway through this process. Let no one stop to demand a price from God, holding what he did as a favour and feeling that his prize is overdue. God benefits nothing by anyone's striving. He is in no need of people's efforts. After all, human beings are weak, barely significant. *"God is in no need of anything in all the worlds."* (Verse 6) It is God who grants a favour to those who strive, helping them in their efforts and establishing them in a position of power on earth. Furthermore, He will reward them well in the life to come: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did."* (Verse 7)

Believers should remain reassured of their great reward. Let them, then, remain patient in adversity, fulfilling the requirements of their test, and persevering in their *jihād.* A great future and a goodly reward await them. This is sufficient for any believer, even though he may not enjoy justice in this present life.

Conflict with Parents

The *sūrah* then refers to a type of test which we have already mentioned: that of ties and bonds with family and loved ones. It gives clear and decisive guidance in such a difficult situation:

> *We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous.* (Verses 8-9)

Parents are the closest of all relatives. They give much to their children. Hence, to be kind to one's parents is a duty required of everyone. Indeed parents must be treated with love, respect, and care. Yet when it comes to one's duty towards God, they cannot be obeyed in opposition to Him: *"We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* (Verse 8) The paramount bond is that with God. Hence, if one's parents are unbelievers, they should be treated with care and kindness, but must not be obeyed or followed. Once this present life is over, all return to God: *"It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 8)

When judgement is made between believers and unbelievers, the former find themselves to be a closely knit unit even though they may have no blood relationship: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly*

admit them among the righteous." (Verse 9) Thus, those who maintain their bond with God will be together in one community, as they are in reality. The bonds created by blood and marriage relations are no longer valid; they end when this present life comes to an end. Such bonds are accidental and carry no real substance because they are not linked to the strongest and unseverable bond, faith.

In explaining this verse, al-Tirmidhī reports that it was revealed in connection with Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş and his mother Ĥamnah bint Abī Sufyān. Sa`d was a very dutiful son. She asked him: 'What is this religion you have embraced? By God, I will not eat or drink until you revert to your original religion, or else I die. You will then be in disgrace for the rest of time as you will be identified as 'his mother's killer'." She did not eat or drink anything for one whole day. Sa`d came to her and said: "Mother! If you had 100 souls and they die one by one, I will not abandon my religion. So you can eat or refuse to eat, as you please." When she despaired of his response, she resumed eating. God then revealed this verse, ordering Muslims to be kind to their parents and to treat them with respect but not to obey them in disbelief.

Thus faith overcame the test of close relations, but kindness and dutifulness remained intact. A believer may be subjected to such a test at any time. When and if this does occur, God's directive and Sa`d's action provide proper guidance.

Hard Tests and False Temptation

The *sūrah* then gives us an image of people who yield abjectly when they face oppression and injustice. Yet, when the going is easy, they make boastful claims:

> *Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God filly aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites.* (Verses 10-11)

Such people declare their belief when things look bright and the future rosy. They think that accepting God's faith is easy and that it does not constitute more than making the briefest of declarations. Yet, *"when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause,"* on account of the declaration they made when everything seemed easy *"he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment."* Thus, they panic and their standards and values become confused. Their very faith is shaken. They imagine that nothing could be worse than the oppression they are suffering, not even God's punishment in the life to come. They wonder why they should endure such

endless suffering when God's punishment could not be any worse. Thus do they equate hardship caused by man with God's punishment; yet the latter is something which no one can estimate.

Such is the attitude of this type of person to the test when it takes the form of physical suffering. Nevertheless, when the situation alters somewhat in their favour, their fickleness is revealed for all to see: *"should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: We have always been with you!"* They claim to have always been with the believers despite their earlier desertion, cowardly betrayal and wrong judgement. When better prospects arrive, everyone can make such boastful claims. Yet they are only yesterday's cowards speaking about false heroics, saying to those who remained steadfast throughout: *"We have always been with you."*

"Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures?" He certainly knows what everyone harbours in their hearts and their innermost thoughts. He knows who is a true believer and who is a hypocrite. Who can deceive God or project a false image to Him? *"Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites."* (Verse 11) He will certainly expose them. After all, the test aimed to separate true believers from hypocrites.

We need to reflect a little on the accurate Qur'ānic description of the error such people make. It says that: *"he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment."* (Verse 10) Such error is not that they weaken and find themselves unable to endure any more. True believers may indeed weaken at some point, because human endurance has its limits. They do not, however, lose sight of the great gulf that separates what their tormentors can inflict on them and God's grievous punishment. They never confuse this transitory world with that of immortality, not even when the torture and hardship visited upon them exceeds human endurance. A believer never loses the sense that God overpowers everything in the universe, not even when he is under the greatest pressure. This is the point that separates true believers from hypocrites.

The last image of such testing is that of temptation. This is presented alongside the unbelievers' false concept of responsibility and reward. The *sūrah* confirms that both responsibility and reward are personal and individual. This is a fundamental Islamic principle that ensures the best and clearest form of justice for all:

> *The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions.* (Verses 12-13)

The Arab unbelievers at the time of the Qur'ānic revelations used to say this. Furthermore, it accords with their own traditions under which a clan or tribe was held collectively responsible for the payment of blood money in cases of accidental killing, and collective responsibility was an established social value. Hence, they imagined that they could bear the responsibility for other people's disbelief, exempting them from God's punishment. On the other hand, they derided the concept of reward in the hereafter. Thus they said to the believers: *"Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves."* (Verse 12)

The *sūrah,* however, gives a decisive reply, making it clear that all creatures return to their Lord as individuals. Everyone is accountable for their own deeds. No one bears responsibility for anyone else: *"But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins."* (Verse 12) The *sūrah* confronts them with the reality of their claims: *"Liars indeed they are."* (Verse 12)

Furthermore, not only will they be made to bear the burden of their own errors, disbelief and false claims; they will also bear the burden of causing others to go astray. The latter who were thus led astray, however, are not exempt from bearing the burden of their own error that led them into such disbelief: *"Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions."* (Verse 13)

Thus this aspect of the testing is closed as people are made to know that God will not hold them accountable as communities. Instead, He holds everyone to account as an individual. Everyone will be held in pledge for whatever they have earned.

2
Like a Spider’s Web

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِۦ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱلطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَـٰلِمُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; (14)

فَأَنجَيْنَـٰهُ وَأَصْحَـٰبَ ٱلسَّفِينَةِ وَجَعَلْنَـٰهَآ ءَايَةً لِّلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people. (15)

وَإِبْرَٰهِيمَ إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَٱتَّقُوهُ ۖ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

And Abraham said to his people: ‘Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! (16)

إِنَّمَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْثَـٰنًا وَتَخْلُقُونَ إِفْكًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَا يَمْلِكُونَ لَكُمْ رِزْقًا فَٱبْتَغُوا۟ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرِّزْقَ وَٱعْبُدُوهُ وَٱشْكُرُوا۟ لَهُۥٓ ۖ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. (17)

وَإِن تُكَذِّبُوا۟ فَقَدْ كَذَّبَ أُمَمٌ مِّن قَبْلِكُمْ ۖ وَمَا عَلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ إِلَّا ٱلْبَلَـٰغُ ٱلْمُبِينُ ﴿١٨﴾

If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message.

(18)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْاْ كَيْفَ يُبْدِئُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ
يُعِيدُهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ١٩

Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God. (19)

قُلْ سِيرُواْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنظُرُواْ كَيْفَ
بَدَأَ ٱلْخَلْقَ ۚ ثُمَّ ٱللَّهُ يُنشِئُ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ٢٠

Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. (20)

يُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرْحَمُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ
تُقْلَبُونَ ٢١

He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. (21)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِى
ٱلسَّمَآءِ ۖ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن
وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ٢٢

And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' (22)

وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِقَآئِهِۦٓ
أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ يَئِسُواْ مِن رَّحْمَتِى وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ٢٣

Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits. (23)

فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن
قَالُواْ ٱقْتُلُوهُ أَوْ حَرِّقُوهُ فَأَنجَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ
ٱلنَّارِ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

[Abraham's] people's only answer was: 'Kill him, or burn him!' But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs

for people who believe. (24)

﴿٢٤﴾

And he said: 'You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.' (25)

وَقَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱتَّخَذۡتُم مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوۡثَٰنٗا مَّوَدَّةَ بَيۡنِكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ ثُمَّ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ يَكۡفُرُ بَعۡضُكُم بِبَعۡضٖ وَيَلۡعَنُ بَعۡضُكُم بَعۡضٗا وَمَأۡوَىٰكُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Lot believed in him. He said: 'I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise.' (26)

۞ فَـَٔامَنَ لَهُۥ لُوطٞۘ وَقَالَ إِنِّي مُهَاجِرٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّيٓۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٦﴾

We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous. (27)

وَوَهَبۡنَا لَهُۥٓ إِسۡحَٰقَ وَيَعۡقُوبَ وَجَعَلۡنَا فِي ذُرِّيَّتِهِ ٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَءَاتَيۡنَٰهُ أَجۡرَهُۥ فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَإِنَّهُۥ فِي ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ لَمِنَ ٱلصَّٰلِحِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. (28)

وَلُوطًا إِذۡ قَالَ لِقَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِنَّكُمۡ لَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلۡفَٰحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُم بِهَا مِنۡ أَحَدٖ مِّنَ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' (29)

أَئِنَّكُمۡ لَتَأۡتُونَ ٱلرِّجَالَ وَتَقۡطَعُونَ ٱلسَّبِيلَ وَتَأۡتُونَ فِي نَادِيكُمُ ٱلۡمُنكَرَۖ فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوۡمِهِۦٓ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُواْ ٱئۡتِنَا بِعَذَابِ ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

He said: 'My Lord! Support You me

قَالَ رَبِّ ٱنصُرۡنِي عَلَى ٱلۡقَوۡمِ ٱلۡمُفۡسِدِينَ ٣٠

against these people who spread corruption.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُنَآ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ بِٱلۡبُشۡرَىٰ قَالُوٓاْ إِنَّا مُهۡلِكُوٓاْ أَهۡلِ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِۖ إِنَّ أَهۡلَهَا كَانُواْ ظَٰلِمِينَ ٣١

When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers.' (31)

قَالَ إِنَّ فِيهَا لُوطٗاۚ قَالُواْ نَحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَن فِيهَاۖ لَنُنَجِّيَنَّهُۥ وَأَهۡلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَهُۥ كَانَتۡ مِنَ ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ٣٢

He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.' (32)

وَلَمَّآ أَن جَآءَتۡ رُسُلُنَا لُوطٗا سِيٓءَ بِهِمۡ وَضَاقَ بِهِمۡ ذَرۡعٗا وَقَالُواْ لَا تَخَفۡ وَلَا تَحۡزَنۡۖ إِنَّا مُنَجُّوكَ وَأَهۡلَكَ إِلَّا ٱمۡرَأَتَكَ كَانَتۡ مِنَ ٱلۡغَٰبِرِينَ ٣٣

Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them; but they said: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind. (33)

إِنَّا مُنزِلُونَ عَلَىٰٓ أَهۡلِ هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡقَرۡيَةِ رِجۡزٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡسُقُونَ ٣٤

We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds.' (34)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكۡنَا مِنۡهَآ ءَايَةَۢ بَيِّنَةٗ لِّقَوۡمٖ يَعۡقِلُونَ ٣٥

We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason. (35)

وَإِلَىٰ مَدۡيَنَ أَخَاهُمۡ شُعَيۡبٗا فَقَالَ يَٰقَوۡمِ ٱعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَٱرۡجُواْ ٱلۡيَوۡمَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَ وَلَا تَعۡثَوۡاْ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مُفۡسِدِينَ ٣٦

And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' (36)

But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ ٱلرَّجْفَةُ فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ فِى دَارِهِمْ جَٰثِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes. (37)

وَعَادًا وَثَمُودَا۟ وَقَد تَّبَيَّنَ لَكُم مِّن مَّسَٰكِنِهِمْ ۖ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ وَكَانُوا۟ مُسْتَبْصِرِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

And the `Ād and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth. (38)

وَقَٰرُونَ وَفِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ ۖ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مُّوسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ سَٰبِقِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

And Qārūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape. (39)

فَكُلًّا أَخَذْنَا بِذَنۢبِهِۦ ۖ فَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِ حَاصِبًا وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَخَذَتْهُ ٱلصَّيْحَةُ وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ خَسَفْنَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ وَمِنْهُم مَّنْ أَغْرَقْنَا ۚ وَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَظْلِمَهُمْ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (40)

مَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ أَوْلِيَآءَ كَمَثَلِ ٱلْعَنكَبُوتِ ٱتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا ۖ وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ ٱلْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ ٱلْعَنكَبُوتِ ۖ لَوْ كَانُوا۟ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. (41)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مِن شَىْءٍ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (42)

Such are the comparisons We draw for

people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge. (43)

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ ۖ وَمَا
يَعْقِلُهَآ إِلَّا ٱلْعَٰلِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe. (44)

خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ
إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَةً لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do. (45)

ٱتْلُ مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَأَقِمِ
ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ
ٱلْفَحْشَآءِ وَٱلْمُنكَرِ ۗ وَلَذِكْرُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ
وَٱللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Overview

The first passage concluded with reference to the general rule that those who profess to believe are subjected to a test, the purpose of which is to separate those who truly believe from those who are liars. The passage also referred to different types of testing, such as physical suffering, pressure exerted by relatives and loved ones, and the lure of temptation.

In this passage we have examples of the kind of tests advocates of faith went through, starting with Noah (peace be upon him). Such examples are drawn from what God's messengers endured from the early days of history. Some details are given about Abraham and Lot, but only very brief references are made in all other cases.

In Noah's story we see very great efforts yielding scanty results. He stayed among his people for 950 years but only a few believers accepted his call. Therefore, *"the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing."* (Verse 14) In the case of Abraham and his people we see a very clear example of foul reward and the tyranny of falsehood. He tried his best to steer his people to follow divine guidance, using sound, logical argument, but *"their only answer was: 'Kill him or burn him'."* (Verse 24)

In the case of Lot's people we see how lust comes out into the open, with no consideration for decency or moral scruple. Here is the vilest human degeneration and perversion, one which pays little heed to sincere warnings: *"But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks*

the truth." (Verse 29)

With Shu`ayb and the people of Madyan we see blatant corruption and wilful disregard for right and justice, in addition to denial of God's message: *"An earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes."* (Verse 37) The references to the `Ād and Thamūd peoples remind us of unbelievers thinking too arrogantly of their own power and immunity, showing no gratitude for God's favours and blessings. Likewise, the reference to Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān reminds us of the tyranny of wealth, dictatorship, and hypocrisy.

These historical references are followed by a demonstration of the flimsiness of forces standing in the way of the divine message, powerful as they may seem: *"Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41) The passage then concludes with an address to the Prophet directing him to recite God's book, attend regularly to prayers, and to leave matters to Him: *"God knows all that you do."* (Verse 45)

Extremely Long Life

> *We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people.* (Verses 14-15)

The weightier view is that the duration of Noah's message was 950 years, preceded by an undefined period before he received his revelations and followed by an unspecified period after he and the believers were saved from the floods. This is certainly a very long life that seems to us, nowadays, to be unnatural and unknown in humanity. Yet we have this information from the most truthful source, God Almighty. This is more than sufficient for it to be accepted as true. If we want some sort of explanation for it, we could say that the human population of the earth at that time was small. It is possible, therefore, that God gave those early generations longer lives so that life on earth could progress. When human numbers increased, there was no longer any need for such long lives. This reflects a phenomenon applicable to some species. For example, certain types of eagle, vulture and turtle can live for centuries. Contrast this with flies, which breed in their millions, and which have a life span as short as two weeks, or less. All wisdom belongs to God, and everything He does is according to a careful measure. Furthermore, despite the near millennium of Noah's advocacy of the divine message there were still only a small number of believers. The floods swept away the overwhelming majority because of their

continued opposition to the divine message. Only the small number of believers were saved in the ark. This story of the floods and the ark was to become 'a sign for all people', telling us about the end of unbelief and injustice.

Issues Clarified

The *sūrah* moves on several centuries bringing into focus the divine message as preached by Abraham:

> *And Abraham said to his people: 'Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not hound to do more than clearly deliver His message.* (Verses 16-18)

Abraham's call to his people was clear, unambiguous and very well structured. It served as a good model for all advocates of the divine faith. He started by telling them of the true nature of his message: *"Worship God, and fear Him."* (Verse 16) Furthermore, he made this appealing to them, stating that it contained much goodness for them, if they would only know it: *"This is best for you, if you but knew it!"* (Verse 16) In other words, if they were not ignorant, they would choose what was good for them. This is a simple and real truth which needs no fiery speeches to impart its essence.

Then Abraham explains how flawed their religion is, especially their worship of wooden statues. What an absurd substitute for worshipping the Almighty. Secondly, evidence to support their beliefs was completely lacking; they only invented what was false. Furthermore, such statues and idols are of no benefit, as they cannot provide people with anything: *"Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you."* (Verse 17)

Then Abraham directs people to seek their provisions from God. On Him alone should they rely for what is most important in their lives: *"Seek, then, all sustenance from God."* (Verse 17) Provisions and sustenance are people's first preoccupation, particularly those who have not experienced the meaning of faith. Yet to seek sustenance from God alone is the most obvious thing to do.

Finally, Abraham calls on them to address their worship and thanks to God who grants sustenance and bestows blessings on all creatures: *"and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him."* (Verse 17) He also tells them that their return to God is inevitable.

It is better for them, then, that they should turn to Him now as believers and address their worship and gratitude to Him alone: *"Indeed, to Him you shall return."* (Verse 17)

If they continue to disbelieve, however, it is of no consequence. They will not affect God in the least. Nor will His Messenger lose anything. Many were the communities that denied God's message in the past. God's messengers' only task is to deliver His message with the utmost clarity: *"If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message."* (Verse 18)

Thus, Abraham shows them the way to belief one step at a time, addressing their hearts with the utmost precision. It is useful for advocates of the divine message to reflect on and emulate Abraham's method.

Reflection on God's Creation

Thereafter, the *sūrah* takes a brief pause to address all who deny faith, the inevitable return of all mankind to God, and the resurrection and reckoning:

> *Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God. Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits.* (Verses 19-23)

This is addressed to everyone who denies God and their meeting with Him. It uses the universe as evidence confirming its truth. The Qur'ān frequently presents the universe as an open book for hearts and minds to ponder on, searching for God's signs, and finding indications of His oneness and the truth of His promises and warnings. Universal phenomena are always present for people to see and contemplate, but they lose their inspiration as a result of long familiarity. Therefore, the Qur'ān directs people's attention to these magnificent scenes, bringing them alive before their eyes and renewing their effects. It does not resort to argument and cold, lifeless logic. Such logic, is, in any case, alien to Islamic thought. Instead, the Qur'ān gives examples, sets the method and outlines the way.

"Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God." (Verse 19) They see with their own eyes how God

originates creation: they see it in the shooting plant, the egg and the foetus, and in everything that comes into being, having had no prior existence. They see it in everything that humans, individually and collectively, cannot bring about themselves. Indeed the secret of life is unfathomable: it was so in the past and it remains so today. We do not know how life originated and where from, let alone that anyone should claim to have brought it about. Life, thus, cannot have any explanation other than that it is of God's own making. It is He who originates creation at every moment before our very eyes. We all see it and cannot deny it.

Moreover, the One who originates life is certainly able to bring people back after death: *"This is indeed easy for God."* Nothing is difficult for God, but He gives the argument by human standards. For us, doing something for the second time is easier than the first; but to God both are equally easy. It needs nothing more than for God to will something and say, 'Be', and it happens.

The *sūrah* then calls on people to travel in all directions and contemplate God's work and signs that appear in all creation, animate and inanimate alike. When they do, they will realize that the One who originates life can bring it back without difficulty: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things."* (Verse 20)

Travelling opens people's hearts to new and unfamiliar vistas. It awakens their senses and minds. By contrast, the place where one lives very often holds no attraction or excitement because of over-familiarity. Yet to return home after a period away often rekindles passion and enthusiasm for what once seemed dull and unremarkable. This, thus, leads to new interaction and appreciation of one's immediate environs. All glory is to God, who has bestowed the Qur'ān from on high and who has full knowledge of how people's hearts and minds function and interact with their surroundings.

"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance." (Verse 20) In the Arabic text the order to travel is followed with a sentence that uses the simple past tense referring to the start of creation. This is significant, for we see today certain things that are indicative of the beginning of life and how the earth came to be populated with different species. Scientific excavations have formed some idea about how life started, spread and progressed, but they have not arrived at anything definite about the secret of life. They do not know how it came to be on earth, nor when the first living creature was placed on it. The order given by God, then, is to search for the beginning of life and to use acquired knowledge to learn about resurrection and the life to come.

We should also note here that the people first addressed by the Qur'ān were not

qualified to undertake such scientific research; it is a much more recent development in the search for knowledge. Hence, they could not arrive at the relevant facts, if this was really intended. Nor could they use such facts to draw a mental picture of how a second life would begin. Therefore, the verse required them to look at the way life starts in plants, animals and man everywhere on earth. With this in mind, travelling served to alert their minds and feelings as they pondered that which was unfamiliar. They could then reflect on the manifestations of God's power, on how easy it is for Him to initiate life at every moment of the night and day.

More importantly, the Qur'ān gives its directives to suit all generations of human life, with their different levels of progress, circumstances and the means available to them. Every generation will take up this order and benefit by it in accordance with what abilities it commands. The order remains applicable to later generations as life develops and progresses, giving fresh incentive and impetus.

"Most certainly, God has the power over all things." (Verse 20) He initiates life and brings it back. He is not restricted by what people imagine to be feasible or unfeasible, possible or impossible.

Part of God's power over all things is that He punishes whomever He wills and bestows His grace upon whomever He wills. To Him all mankind return; none escapes Him and none can evade His will: *"He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support."* (Verses 21-22)

Punishment and mercy are subject to God's will in the sense that He has given clear guidance and made the way of error clear for all. He has given man the propensity to follow either. The choice belongs entirely to man. However, when man chooses to believe in God and shows a willingness to follow His guidance, God will help him as He has committed Himself to do so. On the other hand, when he turns away from divine guidance he becomes isolated and lives in error. The two ways then lead to either God's mercy in the first case or to His punishment in the latter.

"To Him you shall be made to return." (Verse 21) In this instance, the *sūrah* uses the word *tuqlabūn,* which carries connotations of violent return, to suit what follows: *"And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies."* (Verse 22) You have no power to save yourselves from a return to God. Neither your own power that you have on earth nor that of those whom you sometimes worship, such as the angels or *jinn,* thinking that they have power in the skies, have any effect: *"You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support."* (Verse 22) How can there be any protection or support against God? Who could give it: man, angel, *or jinn? They* are all God's creatures and servants. They cannot cause benefit or harm even to

themselves, let alone anyone else.

"Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits." (Verse 23) Man does not despair of God's mercy except when he totally disbelieves, severing all relations with his Lord. Again man does not disbelieve except when he despairs of establishing a relation between himself and God, abandoning all hope of God's grace. The end then is well known: *"It is for these that grievous suffering awaits."* (Verse 23)

Abandoning Home for God

After this intervening address aimed at everyone who denies faith generally, and at Abraham's people by implication, the *sūrah* reports his people's reply to his call. It is a very strange and singular reply, one which shows the arrogance of disbelief and oppression that relies on force and authority: *"[Abraham's.] people's only answer was: Kill him, or burn him.' But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs for people who believe."* (Verse 24) To kill or burn a man is their only response to a simple, clear and logical call with which he addressed their hearts and minds.

How could Abraham alone and deprived of all power stand up to such arrogant brutality? Therefore, God intervened in a direct and open manner, with a miracle no human could have expected: *"God saved him from the fire."* Indeed his saving in this miraculous way should have been seen as clear evidence confirming his message, but only a person whose heart is ready to embrace faith looks at it in this light. Abraham's people, however, did not believe despite this miracle. This shows, then, that miracles do not give guidance. Instead, it is necessary to have an open mind, one willing to accept the truth and divine guidance: *"In this there are signs for people who believe."* (Verse 24)

The first of these signs was Abraham's saving from the fire. The second was the impotence of tyranny to harm just one man standing alone, when God wanted him saved. The fact that miracles do not ensure acceptance of God's guidance by hardened hearts was the third sign. In confirmation of this fact one only needs to look at the history of divine messages, and reflect on the way people's hearts change, and also on the factors that enable people to accept guidance as well as those that leave them astray.

Thereafter, Abraham despairs of those who saw the great miracle with their own eyes for they will never believe in God's oneness. He tells them, in plain terms, the truth of their situation before abandoning them:

And he said: You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than

> *to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.* (Verse 25)

Abraham tells them that they worshipped idols without actually being convinced that such worship was right. They only did this out of courtesy for one another so that they could be together. Even though they may be aware of the truth, people generally follow what their friends worship only to keep their friendship. Thus friendship is given priority over the truth and true faith. This happens in communities that do not take religion seriously. To them, avoiding disagreement with a friend is more important than religion. They do not realize that it is faith that must be taken very seriously, and that there can be no complacency or compromise in matters of faith.

The *sūrah* then shows them their position in the life to come. They are surprised that such friendships on the Day of Judgement are nothing more than mutual hostility. Where once they thought others important, now they curse each other: *"But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another."* (Verse 25) On that day masters will disown their servants, friends will denounce friends, mutual accusations will fly about, and every erring person will accuse others of leading him astray. Yet none of all this will be of any avail when the suffering engulfs them all: *"And your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you."* (Verse 25) They wanted to burn Abraham in the fire, but God saved him. Now when they are in the fire of hell, they will find none to save or protect them.

Abraham's advocacy of his message among his own people and the undoubted miracle they saw culminated in the adoption of the faith by just one man other than his wife, and this man was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Lot emigrated with him from their city, Ur of the Chaldees, in Iraq to settle west of the River Jordan: *"Lot believed in him. He said: I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 26)

Note Lot's statement: "*I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord,"* and the purpose of his emigration. He did not emigrate to save his skin, or to do business or earn his living. He simply emigrated for God's sake, seeking His support. He migrated for his faith, and his purpose was to be able to worship God alone, in complete devotion in a new place, away from a land where there was no hope of people ever changing their erring ways.

God compensated Abraham for having to abandon his hometown and people by giving him offspring who would be chosen to deliver His message to mankind, until the end of human life. All prophets and messages that were sent later were through his descendents. This was, indeed, a great compensation:

We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous. (Verse 27)

This is certainly a rich reward and a manifestation of God's pleasure with the man who personified total devotion.

Sexual Perversion in Public

Lot's story is mentioned next, after he had emigrated with Abraham and settled in the Jordan Valley. Lot then lived on his own with a tribe close to the Dead Sea, which was later called Lake Lot. The township where the tribe lived was known as Sodom. Lot married one of their women and lived among them.

A certain type of perversion had spread among those people, and the Qur'ān mentions that this was the first time ever in human history that such homosexuality had occurred. In the natural state of things a man is attracted to a woman so that the two form a natural productive unit which ensures the continuity of life through procreation, which is common to all living species. It is God who has created them all in pairs made of males and females. Thus, Lot's people were the first ever to yield to such perversion:

And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption.' (Verses 28-30)

Although it is clear from Lot's address to his people that other types of corruption had spread among them, their main abomination was that they engaged in sex with other men. When a man goes beyond natural limits with a woman, his action is a gross crime but it remains within the overall framework of natural desire. Homosexual perversion reaches beyond the natural instinct common to all living species, and indicates a psychological and physical malfunction. God has made the pleasure of sexual interaction between married couples move in harmony with the great line of life and its continuity through offspring. Both man and woman are able to enjoy through it psychological and physical pleasure. Homosexual practices, on the other hand, have no such objective and, as such, cannot give natural pleasure. When anyone finds pleasure in such a perverted practice, it means he has totally broken away from all that is natural and progressive in life.

Lot's people assaulted travellers on the highways, looting their property. They also raped men, which is an even worse act than their other perversion. Furthermore, they spread corruption in the land, and committed shameful acts in their meeting places. When a community find it acceptable to boast of what is indecent, its moral degeneration has become grave indeed. Thus, there was no hope that they would reform themselves.

The story is given here in a concise manner. It appears that Lot first counselled them gently, telling them to stop their immoral practices, but they were persistent. He then warned them of God's punishment and spoke clearly about the abomination of what they did.

"But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth." (Verse 29) Their replies to his warnings were boastful and challenging. With such blunt denial of the truth, there was no hope of their mending their ways. Thus, the messenger sent to them gave them all that he could of advice for their welfare, but in the end he could only seek God's support: *"He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption."* (Verse 30)

At this point the curtains fall. When they rise again, the scene depicts God's response. The angels charged with carrying out God's order visited Abraham, giving him the happy news of a child to be born to him by his wife who up to that point had been barren:

> *When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers. 'He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.'* (Verses 31-32)

This exchange between Abraham and the angels is given in summary form in this instance, because it is not the main point here. It has already been mentioned in Abraham's own story that God gave him Isaac and Jacob, and since the birth of Isaac is the subject of the happy news given to him, it is not given in detail here. Instead, the point is to continue with Lot's story. Therefore, it is only briefly stated that the angels dropped in on Abraham to give him the happy news, and then told him about their main mission: *"They said: We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers."* (Verse 31)

Abraham was compassionate and kind hearted. He reminded the angels that Lot lived there, that he was a good man, and not a wrongdoer. The angels reassured him that Lot would not be harmed. They explained that they knew their task well: *"They answered: We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household,*

except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind." (Verse 32) Lot's wife was inclined towards her people, approving of their crimes and perversions, hence she would not be spared.

The *sūrah* moves to a third scene in which we see Lot as he received the angels who took the guise of handsome young men. Aware of his people's perversion, he feared for his guests knowing that he could not be of much help to them. He was distressed at their presence at such a difficult time: *"Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them."* (Verse 33) As told in this *sūrah,* the story does not mention how Lot's people tried to abuse his guests, his remonstrations with them and their paying no heed. It moves straight on to the final outcome with the angels telling him in his overwhelming distress who they were and what their mission was:

> *But they said: Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind. We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds.* (Verses 33-34)

This last verse draws an image of the total destruction which was visited on the town and its population, with the exception of Lot and the believers in his household. This destruction was visited upon by means of rain and stones covered with mud. Most probably this was a volcanic eruption that turned the town upside down, sinking it into the ground. It followed this with a rain that accompanies volcanic eruptions.

The remains of this destruction were left for all to see, telling of God's signs and serving as a reminder to anyone who has reason to think and reflect: *"We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason."* (Verse 35) This was the natural fate of this evil shoot that had rotted and moulded so badly that it could no longer yield any fruit. The only thing to do with it was fell it.

Different Types of Punishment

The *sūrah* then gives brief references to different communities of unbelievers and the ends they suffered, starting with Shu`ayb's people:

> *And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very*

> *homes.* (Verses 36-37)

In this reference to the Prophet Shu`ayb we see the unity of the divine message and the essence of faith: *"Worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day."* (Verse 36) Worshipping God alone is the basic rule of faith. Looking forward to the Day of Judgement would ensure that they stopped their evil ways. For example, they deliberately defrauded people when they measured or weighed for them in business. They also looted from those who passed through their lands, deprived them of what they had, and generally spread corruption, behaving arrogantly.

Furthermore, they took a stand against their prophet, accusing him of lying; therefore, God destroyed them. He brought into force His law of punishing unbelievers who deny their messengers: *"Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes."* (Verse 37) We mentioned previously the earthquake that shook their land after a great blast left them stunned in their homes, unable to stir. Thus they were left lifeless in fitting requital for their repeated terrorization of others.

Next the *sūrah* refers very briefly to the punishment inflicted on the `Ād and Thamūd:

> *And the `Ād and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth.* (Verse 38)

The `Ād lived at al-Aĥqāf in southern Arabia, close to Ĥadramaut, while the Thamūd lived in al-Ĥijr in northern Arabia, close to al-Qurā Valley. The `Ād were destroyed by devastating winds, while the Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast. Their dwellings, however, still stood and the Arabs of Makkah passed by them on their traditional winter and summer trade trips, thus seeing for themselves the destruction heaped upon these formerly powerful communities.

This brief reference to these two communities reveals the same cause of their going astray as indeed that of other communities: *"Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth."* (Verse 38) They had minds and could see the pointers to divine guidance, but Satan tempted them away, making their deeds seem fair to them. Satan frequently plays on such people's arrogance and false self-esteem. The result being that such communities often succumb to delusions of power and wealth. Thus, Satan turns them away from the only path of true guidance that leads to faith. He thus loses them the chance to save themselves, despite their having the

ability to perceive the truth.

Another very brief reference is made to earlier unbelievers: "Qār*ūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape."* (Verse 39) Qārūn as we learned in the previous *sūrah* was one of Moses' people. He behaved wrongfully towards them, using his wealth and knowledge in oppressive ways. He did not listen to the advice of honest and sincere people who counselled him to follow the path of moderation, humility and justice. Pharaoh was a terrible despot who committed ghastly and horrible crimes, enslaving people and sowing discord between them. In brutal defiance of all justice, he killed the male offspring of the Children of Israel but spared their females. Hāmān was his minister who managed his schemes, assisting him in his tyrannical rule. *"Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth."* (Verse 39) Their wealth, power and cunning could not protect them from God's punishment. They could not escape it. It engulfed them all. *"Indeed, they could not escape."* (Verse 39)

Those who possessed power, wealth, the means to overpower others as well as the means to ensure their own survival have all gone. God destroyed them all after they had long oppressed and persecuted others:

> *We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.* (Verse 40)

The `Ād were smitten by a windstorm. This lifted small stones which hit and killed people. The Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast, Qārūn was swallowed by the earth, whilst Pharaoh and Hāmān were drowned. All were punished on account of their wrongdoing: *"It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves."* (Verse 40)

The Frailty of the Powerful

Now that the destruction of despotic, wrongdoing and wicked unbelievers has been outlined, and bearing in mind what was said at the beginning of the *sūrah* about tests and temptation, the relative power of competing forces is described in a clear simile. There is only one true power and this belongs to God. Every other power is frail and flimsy. Whoever seeks support or protection from other than God is like a spider which clings to a frail home woven of silk that lacks strength. Both the spider and its web, or home, are without real support:

Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge. (Verses 41-43)

This is an amazing but true picture of the powers operating in the universe. People sometimes overlook this truth and hence their values fall by the wayside. Indeed their concept of human relations grows corrupt and all their criteria become ill-balanced. They do not know which way to go, what to take up and what to leave. In this situation, the power of government deceives them. They feel it to be too strong, address their wishes and complaints to it, fear it and try to appease it so that they remain safe from its strong-handed measures. Similarly, they are deceived by other powers, such as that of wealth which they imagine to control people's lives. They, thus, try to obtain wealth so that they can exercise power over others. The power of knowledge also deceives them as they consider it a source of strength, wealth and all other elements that give people power. Hence, they approach it with humility, just like a worshipper engaged in devotion. Whether controlled by individuals, communities or states, apparent power deceives them. They are pulled towards it like moths are attracted to light or swarm towards a fire.

People are thus oblivious of the one power which creates all the little powers, owns, gives, directs and uses them as it pleases. They forget that seeking support and protection from these little powers is just like a spider taking refuge in its web. It remains a small powerless insect that has no power within itself or its flimsy web.

The only real support and protection for man is with God. This is the main truth which the Qur'ān takes special care to instil in the minds of believers. It makes their community stronger than all the powers that try to obstruct it. Over the centuries it enabled the community of believers to place the arrogance of tyrants under its feet and to overcome tyranny in its strongest forts and seemingly impregnable lines. This great truth is established in every believer's mind, it has filled every heart and become part of their very being. It is no longer a word we utter, or a subject for debate. It is the main idea in our lives, minds and senses.

All power belongs to God. The only protection to be sought is from God. Everything else is weak, flimsy and powerless, however much it tries to inflict punishment, be tyrannical and overpowering. They are simply spiders, and what power has a spider other than the silk with which it weaves its web?: *"Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41)

Advocates of the divine message who are often subjected to oppression and

hardship, and also to temptation and deceit, should reflect on this great truth and keep it before their eyes. They must not allow themselves to forget this even for a moment as they face different forces, some trying to inflict harm on them or even crush them, and some trying to lure them to their own line, or to buy them out. But all these forces are no more than the threads of a spider's web. This is their real estimation in God's measure. It is also the measure when compared with true faith when people have the right concept of it.

"God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him." (Verse 42) They seek the protection of patrons to whom they ascribe a share of divinity. God knows the reality of these patrons: they are no more than a spider seeking refuge in its frail web. *"He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 42) He alone has power over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of the universe.

"Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge." (Verse 43) Devoid of knowledge and clear reasoning, some unbelievers took such comparisons as material for ridicule. They said that Muhammad's God speaks about spiders and flies. They were uninspired by this remarkable description because they did not use their reason, while their knowledge too remained scanty: *"None will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge."* (Verse 43)

The Clear Path

This great truth, stated in full clarity, is then linked to the main truth apparent in the design of the universe. This follows the Qur'ānic method of linking all facts to that main truth: *"God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe."* (Verse 44) In perfect harmony with the rest of the *sūrah,* this verse enhances the real link between different realities and the main truth that lies behind the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is this truth that maintains the universe according to a fine and accurate system which never fails or allows inner conflict.

"Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe." (Verse 44) These are the believers whose hearts respond to the signs God has placed in all aspects of creation. These are clearly seen in the harmony apparent in the universe. All is part of a consistent system despite its seeming diversity. It is only believers who perceive these signs and appreciate them, because their eyes and hearts remain open.

At the end of this passage, the *sūrah* links the book revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him), his advocacy of the divine message, prayers and remembrance of god with the truth reflected in the heavens and the earth, and with the advocacy of the divine message ever since Noah's time:

> *Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do.* (Verse 45)

The Prophet is told to recite the book that has been revealed to him because it is his means of advocating God's message. It is a divine sign, one unseverable from the great truth reflected in the creation of the heavens and the earth. He is also told to attend regularly to prayer, because when it is repeatedly offered in the proper manner it becomes a bond with God. Prayer is an act of purification and dedication which cannot fit with the filth of evil and loathsome deeds. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "Whoever offers a prayer and it does not prevent him from loathsome and evil deeds will only take himself further away from God." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This refers to the person who has not attended properly to his prayer; he has rather offered it mechanically. When prayer is properly attended to, it is a form of remembrance of God: "*To remember God is greater still.*" It is greater than all. Greater than any motivation, inclination, or other form of devotion.

"*God knows all that you do.*" Nothing escapes Him, and nothing blurs His eye. All mankind will return to Him when He will requite all in accordance with their deeds.

3
Confused Concepts

Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing; and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.' (46)

وَلَا تُجَٰدِلُوٓاْ أَهۡلَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ إِلَّا بِٱلَّتِي
هِيَ أَحۡسَنُ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ مِنۡهُمۡۖ
وَقُولُوٓاْ ءَامَنَّا بِٱلَّذِيٓ أُنزِلَ إِلَيۡنَا وَأُنزِلَ
إِلَيۡكُمۡ وَإِلَٰهُنَا وَإِلَٰهُكُمۡ وَٰحِدٞ وَنَحۡنُ لَهُۥ
مُسۡلِمُونَ ٤٦

Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers. (47)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنزَلۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَۚ فَٱلَّذِينَ
ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ يُؤۡمِنُونَ بِهِۦۖ وَمِنۡ
هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِهِۦۚ وَمَا يَجۡحَدُ
بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا ٱلۡكَٰفِرُونَ ٤٧

Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt. (48)

وَمَا كُنتَ تَتۡلُواْ مِن قَبۡلِهِۦ مِن كِتَٰبٖ وَلَا
تَخُطُّهُۥ بِيَمِينِكَۖ إِذٗا لَّٱرۡتَابَ
ٱلۡمُبۡطِلُونَ ٤٨

Nay, but this [Qur'ān] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers. (49)

بَلۡ هُوَ ءَايَٰتُۢ بَيِّنَٰتٞ فِي صُدُورِ ٱلَّذِينَ
أُوتُواْ ٱلۡعِلۡمَۚ وَمَا يَجۡحَدُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا
ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ٤٩

They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.' (50)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَٰتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ ۖ
قُلْ إِنَّمَا ٱلْءَايَٰتُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ نَذِيرٌ
مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe. (51)

أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِهِمْ أَنَّآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ
يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَرَحْمَةً
وَذِكْرَىٰ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers. (52)

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ شَهِيدًا ۖ
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ
وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱلْبَٰطِلِ وَكَفَرُوا۟
بِٱللَّهِ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. (53)

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِٱلْعَذَابِ ۚ وَلَوْلَآ أَجَلٌ
مُّسَمًّى لَّجَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ وَلَيَأْتِيَنَّهُم بَغْتَةً
وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. (54)

يَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِٱلْعَذَابِ وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ
لَمُحِيطَةٌۢ بِٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

[That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.' (55)

يَوْمَ يَغْشَىٰهُمُ ٱلْعَذَابُ مِن فَوْقِهِمْ وَمِن
تَحْتِ أَرْجُلِهِمْ وَيَقُولُ ذُوقُوا۟ مَا كُنتُمْ
تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. (56)

يَٰعِبَادِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ أَرْضِى وَٰسِعَةٌ
فَإِيَّٰىَ فَٱعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. (57)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَآئِقَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا
تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, (58)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
لَنُبَوِّئَنَّهُم مِّنَ ٱلْجَنَّةِ غُرَفًا تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا
ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ نِعْمَ أَجْرُ ٱلْعَٰمِلِينَ
﴿٥٨﴾

those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. (59)

ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا۟ وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all. (60)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن دَآبَّةٍ لَّا تَحْمِلُ رِزْقَهَا ٱللَّهُ
يَرْزُقُهَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦٠﴾

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! (61)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ
لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. (62)

ٱللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ
وَيَقْدِرُ لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّن نَّزَّلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ
مَآءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَوْتِهَا
لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۚ بَلْ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

of them are without reason. (63)

وَمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَآ إِلَّا لَهۡوٞ وَلَعِبٞۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلدَّارَ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةَ لَهِيَ ٱلۡحَيَوَانُۚ لَوۡ كَانُواْ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٦٤

The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. (64)

فَإِذَا رَكِبُواْ فِي ٱلۡفُلۡكِ دَعَوُاْ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّىٰهُمۡ إِلَى ٱلۡبَرِّ إِذَا هُمۡ يُشۡرِكُونَ ٦٥

When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, (65)

لِيَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمۡ وَلِيَتَمَتَّعُواْۖ فَسَوۡفَ يَعۡلَمُونَ ٦٦

and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. (66)

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ أَنَّا جَعَلۡنَا حَرَمًا ءَامِنٗا وَيُتَخَطَّفُ ٱلنَّاسُ مِنۡ حَوۡلِهِمۡۚ أَفَبِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ يُؤۡمِنُونَ وَبِنِعۡمَةِ ٱللَّهِ يَكۡفُرُونَ ٦٧

Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings? (67)

وَمَنۡ أَظۡلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفۡتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوۡ كَذَّبَ بِٱلۡحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُۥٓۚ أَلَيۡسَ فِي جَهَنَّمَ مَثۡوٗى لِّلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ٦٨

Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers? (68)

وَٱلَّذِينَ جَٰهَدُواْ فِينَا لَنَهۡدِيَنَّهُمۡ سُبُلَنَاۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَمَعَ ٱلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ٦٩

But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good. (69)

Overview

As we have already explained, the central theme of the *sūrah* is the test and hardship often encountered by people of faith. The purpose is to distinguish believers from hypocrites through a test that can only be endured by those with firm belief. This is coupled with showing the earthly forces that oppose faith and believers and which place all types of difficulty in their way. These are seen to be weak and flimsy. It confirms that God will destroy the wicked and give support to those who show perseverance and steadfastness in the face of adversity. This is consistent with all past messages since Noah's time. It will certainly remain true, as it is linked to the great truth reflected in the nature of the universe and in the unity of the divine message.

The previous passage of the *sūrah* ended with an instruction to the Prophet and the believers to recite the book that was revealed to him. They were further instructed to attend regularly to prayer as a method of God's remembrance and to watch God who knows all that they do.

This final passage continues its discussion of this book, as also its link with books revealed in the past, with an instruction to the believers not to enter into debates with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best. The only exception made here refers to the wrongdoers among them who had altered their scriptures and leaned towards idolatry, which is flagrant wrongdoing. Believers are further instructed to declare their belief in all past messages and divine books, as they are true and confirm what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* then speaks about some of the followers of earlier revelations who believed in this final divine book, while the Arab idolaters who received it through the Prophet sent to them denied it. They were totally heedless of the great blessing God granted them by His choosing a final Messenger from among them. The Prophet speaks to them with God's words while previously he could neither read nor write. This, in itself, should remove any doubt that he was its author.

The unbelievers are warned against hastening God's punishment which could take them by surprise. The *sūrah* describes how close it is to them and how hell will engulf them, from above and from under their feet. It then turns to the believers who were subjected to much oppression in Makkah, urging them to emigrate so that they could live elsewhere and worship God alone. The style employed by the Qur'ān here is remarkable. It addresses every thought that occurs to them and every obstacle that could hamper their progress. Their hearts are within God's grasp at all times. All this is painted in colours that testify to the fact that it is God who has created those hearts. No one other than God could know such inner feelings and awaken them in such a way.

The *sūrah* then wonders at the idolaters and their confused concepts. They admit that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient to His laws and who causes rain to fall so as to quicken the earth after it has been dead. When they travel by sea they call on God alone for help, and then they are sincere in their submission to Him. Yet, after all this, they associate partners with God, deny His book, oppose His Messenger, and persecute those who believe in Him. The *sūrah* also reminds the idolaters of the great favour God has granted them by giving them a secure sanctuary, i.e. the Sacred Mosque, in whose neighbourhood they live, while people all around them live in fear. Yet they fabricate lies against God and associate false deities with Him. He threatens them with punishment, an abode in hell.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a firm promise by God to guide those who strive for His cause. They need to dedicate themselves to Him, overcome the obstacles in their way and persevere in spite of all oppression and hardship.

According to What is Best

> *Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing, and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.'* (Verse 46)

The divine message preached by Noah and subsequent messengers until the last Prophet, Muhammad, (peace be upon them all), is one and the same message. It was given by one God for one purpose, which is to guide mankind, who have gone astray, back to their Lord and to re-educate them in accordance with the way of life He has laid down. Believers in any of these messages are brethren to the believers in all messages. They are all one community worshipping the One God. Mankind, throughout all generations, has been divided into two groups: the believers, who are God's party, and the rejecters, who are Satan's party. This division transcends time and place. Every generation of believers is merely one ring in a long chain stretching over many centuries.

This is the great, noble truth that forms the basis of Islam. It is laid down in this verse which puts human relations at a level much higher than that of blood, race, nationality, or commercial exchange. It gives these relations an additional dimension: that of a link with God based on a single faith that transcends race, colour, nationality, time and place. This leaves only the strongest tie, that of faith.

Thus, Muslims are instructed not to argue with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best: which means explaining the purpose behind

the new message and outlining the links between it and all earlier divine messages. It also stresses the importance of accepting the final form of the divine message which is in full agreement with all previous messages, complementing them in accordance with God's knowledge of what suits people and their needs. There is, however, one exception to be singled out *"those of them who are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 46) These have deviated from the basic belief in God's oneness, associated partners with Him and violated the principles of His way of life. With these no argument is of use. Indeed, there is no need to maintain the same code with them. These are the ones Islam fought when it established its state in Madinah.

Some people fabricate falsehood against the Prophet claiming that he extended good treatment to the people of earlier revelations when he was in Makkah and facing hardship and opposition from the idolaters. Then when he established a state in Madinah he adopted a different policy, waging war against them, and going against everything he had earlier said about them when in Makkah. All such claims are false as is clearly apparent from this Makkan verse. Arguing with the people of earlier revelations in accordance with what is best is limited only to those of them who are not intent on wrongdoing and who have not deviated from the divine faith based on God's absolute oneness.

"And say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves." (Verse 46) There is no need for conflict, argument or dispute, as they all believe in one God, and Muslims believe in what was revealed to the prophets before them. It is all essentially the same. Indeed, the divine way of life follows a smooth way of progress.

> *Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers.* (Verse 47)

This verse begins with *'thus it is',* indicating that the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) followed the same rule and method of revelation to earlier prophets and messengers. *"Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you."* (Verse 47) In their attitude towards it, people divided into two groups: the first, composed of some of those who followed earlier revelations and some Arabs of the Quraysh, accepted it as true and believed in it; the second rejected it despite the testimony given by people of earlier divine religions that it was true and confirmed their own revelations: *"None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers."* (Verse 47) These new revelations are so clear and straightforward that they will not be denied except by those who deliberately shut their minds and spirits

to them, refusing to reflect on them. The Arabic word *kufr* and its derivative *kāfirūn*, which respectively mean 'unbelief' and 'unbelievers', denote in their original linguistic 'cover, screen, etc.' Hence, the use of the word unbelievers in this instance stresses such connotations.

> *Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt.* (Verse 48)

Thus the Qur'ān replies to even their most naïve and jejune of queries. The Prophet had lived among them all his life and could neither read nor write. Then, he gave them this remarkable book, which was unlike anything produced by even the most talented of literary figures. They might have had a reasonable suspicion, had the Prophet been a man of literary talent. What doubt though could they reasonably entertain when they were fully aware of his past among them? Furthermore, even if the Prophet could read and write they should not have entertained any doubt about it. The Qur'ān is its own best witness that it has no human author. It is far greater than man's ability, knowledge and world. Whenever one reflects on its statements one cannot escape the feelings that it is too powerful and too authoritative to be of human composition.

> *Nay, but this [Qur'ān] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers.* (Verse 49)

It gives clear unambiguous indications to those who have been granted sound knowledge, leaving no room for doubt or suspicion. They feel these signs within their own hearts and they are thus reassured. They do not require any further proof. Knowledge that deserves to be described as true is that which is felt to be certain at heart, illuminating a person's way and leading him to what is best. *"None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers."* (Verse 49) These are the ones who are unfair in their evaluation of things and who stray a long way from the truth and the right path.

What Need for Miracles?

> *They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.'* (Verse 50)

What they want are miracles like those which earlier messengers were given when humanity was still in its infancy. These serve as final evidence only to the generation and community which sees them. This final message, however, provides such evidence to everyone who receives its call until the end of human life. Therefore, its miracle is given in the form of verses of the Qur'ān, a miraculous book which is full of wonders. It opens its treasures to all generations. It is made up of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. As they reflect on its verses they realize that they are in fact miraculous signs and they recognize the source from which they derive their power.

"Say: Signs are in the power of God alone." (Verse 50) He produces them when there is need according to His own plans. It is not for the Prophet or anyone else to make suggestions to God concerning the provision of any sign. The Prophet tells them this, explaining that it is alien to his manners and nature that he should make such a suggestion. *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 50) I explain things, deliver my message and warn people. When I have done that, the task assigned to me has been fulfilled. It is up to God to decide what to do next. Thus the faith is presented purely, free of any confusion and suspicion. The limits of God's Messenger's task are defined so that people do not become confused with God's attributes. No ambiguity is allowed to blur his message. Such ambiguity occurred with earlier messages when the miracles shown to people became confused with myth and legend, leading to deviation from the path of truth.

Those people who demand physical miracles do not truly appreciate the great favour God has granted them with the Qur'ān. He bestowed this from on high so as to guide them:

> *Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe.* (Verse 51)

Their demands reflect an attitude of discontent with God's great favour when, in fact, no amount of thanks and gratitude is adequate. Is it not enough for them that they actually live with this Qur'ān as it is revealed from on high. It tells them about what they feel within themselves, explains what takes place around them and makes them feel that God is watching over them, taking care of them, relating historical accounts that should educate them? What is man but a little creature, lost in God's great universe? Indeed, mankind, the earth they live on and the sun around which it moves are no more than little particles in this great expanse. They are held in place only by God's power. Yet He honours them, bestowing His revelations so that they are recited to them, and they are neither thankful nor satisfied.

"Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe." (Verse 51) It is only believers who feel this grace. They appreciate His blessings as He invites them to come to Him when He is the Most High, the Supreme. Such people benefit by the Qur'ān, because it lives in their hearts, opens its treasures to them and enlightens their souls with true knowledge and supreme light.

Those who do not feel any of this are the ones who demand a physical miracle so that they can accept this Qur'ān as true. These are blind people whose hearts do not open up to light. There is no use trying to argue with such people. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to leave a decision about them to God Almighty:

> *Say: God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers.* (Verse 52)

A witness who knows all that takes place in the heavens and earth gives the best and greatest testimony. It is He who knows that their situation is false: *"They who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers."* (Verse 52) They are the absolute losers; they are the ones who forego everything. They lose both this world and the life to come, as also themselves, divine guidance, righteousness, reassurance, truth and light.

To believe in God is, in itself a great gain, and to be rewarded for it is by God's grace. Belief provides reassurance and a steady footing along the way, steadfastness in the face of adversity, trust in God's help and protection, and confidence as to the eventual outcome. This is indeed a great gain, and it is what the unbelievers lose.

Hastening God's Punishment

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers do. It refers to their precipitation of God's punishment, when hell draws close to them:

> *They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. [That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above them and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.'* (Verses 53-55)

The unbelievers heard the warnings but could not understand God's wisdom in

allowing them time to consider their positions. Hence, they challenged the Prophet to hasten their punishment. God often allows people time so that the wrongdoers continue their wicked and arrogant ways. He also tests the believers so that they grow stronger in faith and perseverance. Moreover, those who cannot remain steadfast when exposed to a test abandon the believers' ranks. He also allows them time so that those of them whom He knows to have goodness in their hearts recognize the truth, mend their ways and accept His guidance; or else, their own offspring may grow up as believers worshipping Him alone even though their fathers were errant and misguided. Or He may leave them a while for some other purpose of His.

The Arab idolaters, however, could not understand God's purpose and wise planning. Hence their challenge hastening their own punishment: *"Had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them."* (Verse 53) At this point God threatens them with the punishment which will come upon them, at its set time, but when they least expect it. Thus, it will take them by surprise and they will not be able to escape it: *"Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares."* (Verse 53)

Such punishment overwhelmed them later, at the Battle of Badr, confirming the truth of God's warning. They saw with their own eyes how God's warning and promise took effect. Yet God did not destroy them totally, as He did with earlier communities. Nor did He respond to their demands to see a physical miracle, so that they could avoid the punishment that comes to any community which continues to deny His message, persisting in disbelief, after it has been given a physical miracle. In fact many of them later accepted the faith and some even joined the ranks of the best advocates of Islam. God also produced from among their offspring many who raised the banner of Islam high, over many generations. All of this was part of God's design and purpose, known only to Himself.

The warning of sudden punishment in this life which occurs when least expected is followed by another censure for their continued hastening of punishment: "*They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is encompassing the unbelievers."* (Verse 54) Following the Qur'ānic method of presenting the future as though it is taking place now, the *sūrah* describes hell as encompassing the unbelievers. To them, this is hidden behind the curtains of the future, but to God, it is a visible reality. Describing its hidden reality fills one with awe and makes their hastening of punishment increasingly singular. How could anyone hasten his own punishment when hell engulfs him while he remains heedless, deluded.

The *sūrah* then draws an image of them as they are engulfed by hell, yet hastening their punishment: *"On the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.'"* (Verse 55)

This is a fearful scene, coupled with a humiliating rebuke and painful censure: *"Taste now [the result of] your own doings."* (Verse 55). Such is the end of paying no heed to the warnings and of hastening the punishment.

Inevitable Death

The *sūrah* leaves careless unbelievers in this scene of suffering, one which engulfs them from above and from under their feet. It moves on to address the believers who suffer persecution at the hands of the unbelievers, who aim to prevent them from worshipping God. It tells them to try to flee from persecution so that they can truly practise their faith. This is given in the form of a loving address that touches one's heart:

> *You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all.* (Verses 56-60)

The Creator of these hearts who knows all their feelings, fleeting thoughts, perceptions and ideas addresses them with love, inviting them to emigrate for the sake of their faith: *"You servants of mine who have believed."* These words, right from the outset give them a feeling of their true status, linking them to their Lord: *Servants of Mine!'*

This is the first caring touch, while the second is felt in what comes next: *"Spacious is My earth."* You are My servants, and this is My earth, which is spacious and can comfortably accommodate you. What keeps you, then, in a hostile place where you are oppressed and persecuted on account of your faith, and where you cannot worship God in freedom? Leave this narrow and restricted place and find somewhere else in My spacious earth, to enjoy freedom of worship: *"Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone."* (Verse 56)

Sorrow at leaving one's own homeland is the first feeling which stirs in the mind of one who is invited to leave his home. Hence, these words stress closeness to God and the earth's spaciousness. Since it is all God's earth, then the place to be loved most is that where one enjoys freedom to worship God alone.

The *sūrah* continues to address people's thoughts, and hence how we know the fear involved in emigration. The early Muslims in Makkah felt that they ran the risk

of death if they tried to leave. The unbelievers were not averse to stopping them from emigrating because they felt that such emigration represented a threat to their own security. There were also the dangers that they could encounter on the way, should they even manage to leave Makkah. Therefore, the next verse addresses such concerns: *"Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return."* (Verse 57)

Death is inevitable wherever one happens to be. Therefore, it should not be considered when we do not know its causes. It is to God that everyone will return. They should now emigrate to some place of safety in His spacious earth, for they will inevitably return to Him at the end of their term. They are His servants whom He looks after in this world and in the life to come. Why should any of them entertain any fear or worry now that God speaks to them with such care?

God does not, however, leave it at that. He tells them about what He has prepared for them in their future abode. If they leave their own homeland, there are other places on earth that will welcome them; and if they desert their homes, they will be compensated with much better dwellings in heaven: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide."* (Verse 58) At this point God urges them to do what is good, remain patient in all situations and place their trust in Him: *"Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust."* (Verses 58-59) This should give them all the encouragement to remain steadfast when worry and fear are keenly felt and encouragement is badly needed.

When people are forced to leave their homeland another worry they entertain is that of livelihood. After all they are abandoning their homes and property, where they are familiar with what is needed and with the available opportunities. Therefore, the *sūrah* also reassures them on this count: *"How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you."* (Verse 60) It places before their eyes the realities they see around them. Countless are the living creatures that do not know how to gather, carry, care for their sustenance or know what they need for their own survival. They do not know how to provide or store it. Nevertheless, God provides for them all, preserving them from death by starvation. He provides for people in the same way. They may think that they produce their means of sustenance, but the fact is that God grants them the ways and means to obtain what they need for their living, and this, in itself, is a favour given to them by God. They could not have obtained such ways and means without God's grace. Therefore, they should not worry about their sustenance when they emigrate. They are God's servants, travelling on God's earth, and God will provide for them wherever they are, just as He provides for every living creature.

These caring touches conclude by emphasizing the bond with God. This so that believers are fully aware of the care He takes of them. He listens to them, knows their

situation and does not abandon them: *"He alone hears all and knows all."* (Verse 60) Thus ends this short round which delivers caring touches to every heart and responds to every thought, replacing every sort of worry, fear and weariness with reassurance, confidence and comfort. Believers now feel that they will never be abandoned by God, the Most Merciful. Only the Creator understands the worries that overwhelm people's minds, and none cures their hearts except the One who knows all that hearts contain.

Contradictions Galore

Having completed a short round with the believers, the *sūrah* then picks up again the clear contradiction in the unbelievers' position and concepts. They acknowledge that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient, causes rain and quickens the earth after it has been dead. They know what all this involves in providing sustenance for them, either in abundance or small measure. They turn to God alone for help when they are in a situation of fear. Yet in spite of all this, they associate partners with God, persecute those who worship Him alone and try to turn them away from their straightforward faith. They are oblivious to God's grace. It is He who has given them a life of security in the neighbourhood of His Sacred Mosque where they themselves are guilty of religious oppression.

> *If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them are without reason. The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings? Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers?* (Verses 61-68)

These verses give us a clear idea of the beliefs of the Arabs at the time the Qur'ān

was revealed. It shows how such belief was originally based on God's oneness, but subsequently suffered distortion. There is no wonder to this, for the Arabs were the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son (peace be upon them both). In fact, the Arabs believed that they followed Abraham's religion, taking pride in it on this basis. They did not care much for Judaism or Christianity, even though both were known and practised in Arabia. They were, in a sense, oblivious to the great confusion that had crept into their faith.

Whenever they were asked about the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who controlled the sun and the moon, and brought rain to give life to the earth, they acknowledged that it was all done by God. Yet at the same time, they worshipped their idols, or *jinn,* or the angels, making these God's partners in the worship they offered, even though such beings had no share in creation. God highlights such ridiculous contradictions as follows: *"How perverted, then, are their minds."* (Verse 61) How can they turn a blind eye to the truth and accept instead this muddled concept? *"Yet most of them are without reason."* (Verse 63) Certainly anyone who accepts such contradictions has no reason.

In between these questions about the great universal phenomena, the *sūrah* states that God gives provisions in plenty or in small measure to whomever He wills of His servants. Thus, it links the provision of sustenance with the creation of the universe and all other aspects of God's limitless power. It is all done in accordance with God's knowledge: *"God has full knowledge of everything."* (Verse 62)

There is an obvious link between people's provision and sustenance on the one hand and the universal cycles of stars and planets, particularly in relation to water, plants and life on the other. To give sustenance in plenty or small measure is something that God controls, in accordance with the phenomena mentioned in the *sūrah.* Sources of sustenance, including rain, rivers, plants, animals, minerals, marine life, game animals and other sources, are all directly subject to the general laws that operate in the universe bringing the sun and the moon into subservience. Should these laws suffer a change, even a slight one, the effect will be clearly apparent in all aspects of life on earth, as also in underground natural resources. Indeed, underground resources are formed and stored in quantities and qualities that differ from one place to another for reasons that are directly related to the earth, its composition and how it is affected by the sun and the moon.[13]

The Qur'ān uses the great open universe as its telling and convincing proof. The universe as a whole provides the setting for the truth it presents. We stand to reflect on the wonders of the universe, feeling that they are brought about by the One

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[13] Further discussion of this aspect is made in commenting on the verse that says: *"It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions."* (25: 2) in Vol. XII, pp. 393-295.

Creator. We do not need advanced science or profound knowledge to appreciate such great wonders as the universe exhibits. All we need is an alert mind and a feeling heart. As we see God's wonders we can only praise and glorify Him, feel close to Him.

Against this backdrop of life on earth and our means of sustenance, whether plentiful or stinted, an accurate standard is provided against which to measure all values. Thus, we see that this world, with all that it provides of sustenance, comfort and pleasure, is trivial when compared with the life to come: *"The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it."* (Verse 64) When it is not viewed as a means to ensure happiness in the life to come, but felt to be, of itself, the ultimate objective and its pleasures coveted, this present life, with all that it can give, is no more than trifling play. It is the life to come that is the one that is full of life and fulfilment.

In saying so, the Qur'ān does not advocate a life of austerity that discards comfort and pleasure. This is contrary to what Islam encourages. What it means is that we should look to the hereafter when enjoying life's pleasures, limiting ourselves to what God permits. Moreover, we should look at life's comforts and pleasures as something dispensable, so as not to make of them the goal we seek at any price. What we need is a good sense of proportion so as to give everything its correct value. We must have a true measure showing the value of the present life *vis-a-vis* the hereafter. Thus we will he able to enjoy life's pleasures as we please, knowing how to look at them: this present life is amusement and play, while the hereafter is the true life.

The *sūrah* continues its outline of the unbelievers' contradictions: *"When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him."* (Verse 65) When they are on board a ship, moving across the sea, feeling their boat to be little more than a toy pushed about by the waves, they remember none other than God. It is to Him alone that they turn for support, and only in His power do they feel that their safety can be guaranteed. Thus, their feelings and speech confirm His oneness. They recognize this as coming from the depths of their nature. However, *"as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him."* (Verse 65) They forget their nature, and their prayers, reverting to their association of partners with God.

Such deviation means they are ungrateful for the blessings God grants them, and that they ignore the upright nature and clear proofs He has given them. They will, then, enjoy their worldly life for the limited duration of their time on earth, taking little heed of the inevitable result: *"Thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the*

truth].” (Verse 66) This is a subtle warning that what they will come to know will certainly not please them.

The *sūrah* then reminds them of God’s favour. It is He who has placed them close to a secure sanctuary where they live in complete security. Yet they neither remember such blessing, nor offer thanks for it by worshipping God alone. On the contrary, they try to scare the believers who live close to it: *“Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God’s blessings?”* (Verse 67)

Those living in the vicinity of the Ka`bah enjoyed a life of security: they were honoured by other people for the sake of God’s House. All around them, Arabian tribes continuously feuded with each other, creating an atmosphere of fear. They only felt secure when they were in the vicinity of the Sacred House. It was amazing, therefore, that they made that very House a place where they put their idols and worshipped other beings. Hence, the rhetorical question: *“Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God’s blessings?”* (Verse 67)

“Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers?” (Verse 68) They certainly invented lies against God, attributing partners to Him. They also denied the truth they were given, describing it as lies. Hence, hell is the right abode for such unbelievers.

The *sūrah* concludes with an image of the other party who strive hard so that they earn God’s pleasure and establish a relation with Him. They endure whatever hardship they are called upon to endure, allowing no feelings of despair to creep into their minds. They withstand every hardship and pass every test, fulfilling their duties and marching along the long, hard road to their well-defined goal. Such people will not be left alone. God will never suffer their belief and struggle to be wasted. He looks at them from on high, and He is pleased with them. He will then provide them with guidance, helping them along the road, and give them ample reward for their perseverance and good works: *“But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good.”* (Verse 69)

SŪRAH 30

Al-Rūm

(The Byzantines)

Prologue

The first few verses of this *sūrah* were revealed when Persia overpowered the Byzantine Empire in the Arab areas that were under its rule. This was also a time when arguments in Makkah raged between the early Muslims and Arab idolaters. Since the Byzantines at that time were Christians, and the Persians were Magians, the unbelievers in Makkah exploited the event, drumming up the victory of polytheism over monotheism, and seeing in this Persian victory an omen for their own victory over the believers.

Therefore, the opening of this *sūrah* heralds a victory for the people of the Scriptures, the Byzantines, within a few years. It says that this victory will bring much rejoicing to the believers for they love for believers of any divine religion to gain the upper hand.

The Qur'ān does not, however, stop at making this promise, nor does it confine itself to the event mentioned. In fact, it uses the event to show the believers and their opponents wider horizons; in essence, it establishes a link between them and the universe. It also relates God's rule to support divine faith to the great truth that regulates the heavens, the earth and all that is between them, as well as to the past, present and future of humanity. It then moves on to the life to come and the world beyond this earth. Indeed, the Qur'ān takes us on a great round in which we see the marvels of the universe, the human soul, people's situations and the wonders of nature. We are, thus, able to look at the wider horizons of knowledge, for our lives have been elevated and broadened. Furthermore, we are released from the strict

confines of time, place and event, and are able to look at the universe, its operative rules, history, present and future.

Thus, people's concept of the true nature of the bonds and relations in this great universe is set on a higher platform. They begin to feel the real greatness of the laws that govern the universe and human nature, and appreciate those that regulate human life and its events. In this way, positions of victory and defeat are defined, and fair measures to judge people's actions and activities in this life are set, so as to give them just reward both in the present life and in the life to come.

In the light of this broad concept, the universality of the Islamic message is clearly shown. Its interaction with events and world situations, even when it is still in its infancy and confined to Makkah and the surrounding valley, appears to be very positive. Its scope is broadened beyond this earth so as to link it to the nature of the universe and its major rules, human nature and its profound depths, as well as to the past and present of human life both in this world and in the world beyond.

Thus, a Muslim's heart and mind are linked to these horizons, so as to influence his feelings and the way he looks at life and values generally. He looks up to heaven and the life to come and contemplates the wonders and marvels of the universe. He appreciates his own position, and that of his community, in this great expanse. He realizes his own value and the value of his faith both in people's and God's measures. He thus fulfils his role and does his duties with a clear mind and with confidence and reassurance.

In the method it follows in outlining these links and their significances in the overall system of the universe, as well as their effects on people's hearts, the *sūrah* may be thought of as consisting of two interlinked sections. In the first, it establishes a link between the victory granted to the believers and the truth that provides the firm basis on which the universe is established and with which this life as well as the next are closely associated. It directs people's attention to God's laws as they applied to earlier communities and generations, and in this context makes use of an analogy about resurrection. Here the *sūrah* depicts a scene from the Day of Judgement and what happens then to believers and unbelievers. This is followed with further scenes of the universe and the signs God has placed in it, highlighting the effects these scenes have on people's hearts. The *sūrah* then gives an example drawn from themselves and their relations with their slaves to show the stupidity of the idea of multiple deities, proving that it is based on whims and desires that are devoid of truth and knowledge. This section concludes with a directive to the Prophet to follow the clear path of truth, which is the path of an upright nature that neither alters to suit desires nor divides into sects or divergent groups.

In the second section the *sūrah* depicts the fickleness of people's cares and interests

and how these are unsuitable as a basis for building human life. What people should look to instead is a constant measure that does not bend to suit nefarious interests. It describes such people when they enjoy God's mercy and when they are afflicted by hardship, as well as in situations of affluence and poverty. It moves on to speak of how provisions should be used and increased. It then discusses the question of God's alleged partners from this angle, showing how such alleged deities can never provide sustenance, initiate or terminate life. It links the spread of corruption on land and sea with what people do, and directs them to go about the earth reflecting on the ends met by past communities of unbelievers who associated partners with God. It then directs the Prophet to follow the religion of pure human nature before a day comes when everyone will be rewarded for what they do. Like it did in the first section, the *sūrah* then provides some scenes of the universe, commenting that true guidance is that given by God, while the Prophet's task is only to deliver his message. It is not in his power to make the blind see or the deaf hear. The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round within the human constitution, reminding us of the stages of man's development from beginning to end, starting with utter weakness in childhood, before it mentions death, resurrection and judgement, giving us a new scene of that day. This section and the *sūrah* itself conclude with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity and to bear whatever difficulties he meets. He should always remain confident that God's promise will be fulfilled. Hence, he must not let himself be disturbed by those who lack faith.

Both the ambience of the *sūrah* and its general flow contribute to its main theme, namely the close relation between people's situations and life's events; the past, present and future in human life and universal laws. This shows that every little action, event, growth, consequence, setback and victory are all closely linked, and subject to an accurate law. In all these, the final decision rests with God: *"All power of decision belongs to God before and after."* (Verse 4) This truth is confirmed time after time in the Qur'ān, because it is the basic truth in the Islamic faith which gives rise to all concepts, values and standards.

1
Signs to Reflect Upon

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)	الٓمٓ ١
Defeated have been the Byzantines (2) *in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory* (3)	غُلِبَتِ ٱلرُّومُ ٢ فِيٓ أَدۡنَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَهُم مِّنۢ بَعۡدِ غَلَبِهِمۡ سَيَغۡلِبُونَ ٣
within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice (4)	فِي بِضۡعِ سِنِينَۗ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡأَمۡرُ مِن قَبۡلُ وَمِنۢ بَعۡدُۚ وَيَوۡمَئِذٖ يَفۡرَحُ ٱلۡمُؤۡمِنُونَ ٤
in God's support. He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful. (5)	بِنَصۡرِ ٱللَّهِۚ يَنصُرُ مَن يَشَآءُۖ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ٥
This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. (6)	وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِۖ لَا يُخۡلِفُ ٱللَّهُ وَعۡدَهُۥ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكۡثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٦
They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware. (7)	يَعۡلَمُونَ ظَٰهِرٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا وَهُمۡ عَنِ ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ غَٰفِلُونَ ٧

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا۟ فِىٓ أَنفُسِهِم ۗ مَّا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ
ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِٱلْحَقِّ
وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّاسِ
بِلِقَآئِ رَبِّهِمْ لَكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord. (8)

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوٓا۟
أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَأَثَارُوا۟ ٱلْأَرْضَ وَعَمَرُوهَآ
أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا عَمَرُوهَا وَجَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ۖ فَمَا كَانَ ٱللَّهُ لِيَظْلِمَهُمْ
وَلَٰكِن كَانُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (9)

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسَٰٓـُٔوا۟ ٱلسُّوٓأَىٰٓ أَن
كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَكَانُوا۟ بِهَا
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (10)

ٱللَّهُ يَبْدَؤُا۟ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ
تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١١﴾

God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return. (11)

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يُبْلِسُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, (12)

وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُم مِّن شُرَكَآئِهِمْ شُفَعَٰٓؤُا۟
وَكَانُوا۟ بِشُرَكَآئِهِمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. (13)

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَتَفَرَّقُونَ
﴿١٤﴾

And when the Last Hour strikes, they

will all be divided: (14)

as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; (15)

فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
فَهُمْ فِي رَوْضَةٍ يُحْبَرُونَ ١٥

but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment. (16)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ وَكَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَلِقَآيِٕ
ٱلْأٓخِرَةِ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ فِي ٱلْعَذَابِ مُحْضَرُونَ
١٦

Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. (17)

فَسُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ حِينَ تُمْسُونَ وَحِينَ
تُصْبِحُونَ ١٧

To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. (18)

وَلَهُ ٱلْحَمْدُ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَعَشِيًّا وَحِينَ تُظْهِرُونَ ١٨

He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. (19)

يُخْرِجُ ٱلْحَيَّ مِنَ ٱلْمَيِّتِ وَيُخْرِجُ ٱلْمَيِّتَ
مِنَ ٱلْحَيِّ وَيُحْيِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَاۚ
وَكَذَٰلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ١٩

One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. (20)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَنْ خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ إِذَآ
أَنتُم بَشَرٌ تَنتَشِرُونَ ٢٠

And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ
أَزْوَٰجًا لِّتَسْكُنُوٓاْ إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُم
مَّوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةًۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ٢١

between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. (21)

And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. (22)

And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. (23)

And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. (24)

And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. (25)

To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. (26)

It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَٱخْتِلَـٰفُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَٰنِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِى
ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَـٰتٍ لِّلْعَـٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ مَنَامُكُم بِٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ
وَٱبْتِغَآؤُكُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ
لَـَٔايَـٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ يُرِيكُمُ ٱلْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا
وَطَمَعًا وَيُنَزِّلُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَيُحْىِۦ
بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَآ ۚ إِنَّ فِى
ذَٰلِكَ لَـَٔايَـٰتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦٓ أَن تَقُومَ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ
بِأَمْرِهِۦ ۚ ثُمَّ إِذَا دَعَاكُمْ دَعْوَةً مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ
إِذَآ أَنتُمْ تَخْرُجُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَلَهُۥ مَن فِى ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ كُلٌّ
لَّهُۥ قَـٰنِتُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَبْدَؤُا۟ ٱلْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُۥ وَهُوَ
أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ ۚ وَلَهُ ٱلْمَثَلُ ٱلْأَعْلَىٰ فِى
ٱلسَّمَـٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ
﴿٢٧﴾

most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (27)

ضَرَبَ لَكُم مَّثَلًا مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۖ هَل لَّكُم
مِّن مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُكُم مِّن شُرَكَآءَ فِى
مَا رَزَقْنَٰكُمْ فَأَنتُمْ فِيهِ سَوَآءٌ تَخَافُونَهُمْ
كَخِيفَتِكُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ
ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason. (28)

بَلِ ٱتَّبَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُم بِغَيْرِ
عِلْمٍ ۖ فَمَن يَهْدِى مَنْ أَضَلَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ وَمَا لَهُم
مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them. (29)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ ٱللَّهِ
ٱلَّتِى فَطَرَ ٱلنَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا ۚ لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ
ٱللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلدِّينُ ٱلْقَيِّمُ وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. (30)

۞ مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَٱتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ
وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, (31)

مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا۟ دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا۟
شِيَعًا ۖ كُلُّ حِزْبٍۭ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold. (32)

The Natural Bond of Faith

> *Alif Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support. He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful. This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware.* (Verses 1-7)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters. In our opinion, that a number of *sūrahs* so commence served to alert people to the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of letters they knew well, being the letters of their own alphabet and the sounds of their own language. Yet they cannot produce anything like the Qur'ān. Indeed, it continues to challenge and defy them, and still they cannot match it.

These letters are followed by a true prophecy that the Byzantines would regain victory against the Persians within a few years. Al-Ṭabarī reports on `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd's authority: "The Persians won victory against the Byzantines. The Arab idolaters liked that the Persians should win, while the Muslims preferred that the Byzantines should be victorious because they were followers of a monotheistic faith, which was closer to their own beliefs. When the opening of this *sūrah* was revealed, some idolaters said to Abū Bakr: 'Your friend says that the Byzantines will score a victory against the Persian Empire within a few years.' He replied: 'He tells the truth.' They said: 'Will you be prepared to bet on that?' He made a bet with them wagering four young camels that this victory would take place within seven years.[14] But seven years passed and nothing took place. The idolaters were delighted and the Muslims felt this hard. They mentioned it to the Prophet and he asked them: 'How do you define the phrase "within a few years" in your language?' They said: 'Less than ten.' He said to Abū Bakr: 'Go and increase the bet and extend the duration by two years.' The two years were not out before travellers brought the news that the Byzantines had scored a great victory against the Persians. The believers were delighted." We do not need to go into other reports that speak about this event, but we will now look at some of the effects of this historical event.

The first thing to note in all this is the mutual support between different groups of unbelievers, in all generations and areas, against the message based on God's oneness. States did not have close contacts in former times as they do now. Nevertheless, those Makkan idolaters felt that a victory achieved by a community of unbelievers like them against the followers of divine Scripture was akin to their own victory. On the other hand, the Muslims felt that there was a bond between them and

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[14] This clearly took place before the prohibition of betting as part of gambling. The prohibition was decreed much later, after the Muslim state was established in Madinah.

the followers of the Scriptures. They were grieved that polytheists anywhere should succeed. Muslims felt that their faith and prospects were not isolated from what took place elsewhere in the world. For all events have a bearing on the great issue of faith or unfaith.

Many are those in our time who overlook this fact of which both Muslims and non-Muslims were cognizant 14 centuries ago, during the Prophet's lifetime. Hence such people limit themselves within their own geographical or national boundaries, oblivious of the fact that the true issue is that of faith, and that the real battle is between Satan's party and the believers. Muslims today badly need to form a proper understanding of the nature of that battle so that they are not deceived by the false banners raised by unbelievers. These do not fight against Muslims for anything other than their faith, numerous as the pretexts and causes are that they advance.

We also note the Muslim's absolute confidence in the fulfilment of God's promise, as is clearly apparent in Abū Bakr's unhesitating attitude. The unbelievers try to create doubt in his mind pointing out what the *sūrah* says about the Byzantines' future victory, but he maintains that it is the truth. They ask him whether he is prepared to bet on this and he does so unhesitatingly. Then the promise is fulfilled within the time specified, i.e. 'within a few years'. This absolute confidence was a great asset for the early Muslims, strengthening and supporting them as they faced all manner of obstacles and endured persecution until God's promise to them was fulfilled. Such confidence is indispensable for every advocate of faith embarking on the long struggle for his faith.

It is also noteworthy that the opening verses giving information of future events include an interpolated sentence: *"All power of decision belongs to God before and after."* (Verse 4) This statement refers all matters, in all situations, to God. It is a maxim that applies to all events: victory and defeat, and the rise and fall of states and empires. Indeed all that takes place anywhere in the universe is determined by God, and fulfils His purpose in accordance with His wisdom. Events and changing situations are only aspects of the operation of God's unrestricted will which is not subject to influence by anything or anyone. It is God alone who knows what lies beyond it and how it operates. Hence, the best that we can do is unhesitatingly submit to God's will.

To Whom Power Belongs

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support." (Verses 1-5) God's promise was certainly fulfilled as stated, and the believers rejoiced at the

victory granted by God. *"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful."* (Verse 5) Thus the decision is His while His support is granted to whom He chooses. Nothing opposes His will. Indeed His will, which determines the results, is the same as the will that brings about the elements and the causes that leads to these results. Thus, there is no conflict between the desired results and the prevailing circumstances. The laws that operate the whole universe are devised by the same free will. It is this will that has determined that there should be laws of nature which operate without fail, and systems to ensure stability. Both victory and defeat are the results of certain factors that work in accordance with the laws set in operation.

The Islamic faith is very clear and logical. While it makes clear that all power of decision rests with God, it does not exempt people from taking the measures that are normally necessary to bring about practical results. Whether these results take effect is not part of people's responsibility, because it ultimately belongs to God's overall design. A bedouin left his she-camel untied and went into the mosque to pray. As he entered, he said: 'I fully rely on God.' The Prophet said to him: 'Tie your she-camel and then rely on God.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Thus, Islam makes true reliance on God conditional on taking all the necessary measures in any particular situation, knowing that ultimately all decisions are left to Him.

"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful." (Verse 5) Victory is thus the result of the power that makes it a reality and the mercy that fulfils what is in the best interests of people. In this way, such a victory is an aspect of mercy for both the victors and the vanquished. God says in the Qur'ān: *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted."* (2: 251) That the earth should remain free of corruption is ultimately good for all, including those who are defeated.

"This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verses 67) Such victory has been promised by God, which means that it will certainly come about in real life. For, *"never does God fail to fulfil His promise."* The facts of the matter are that His promise issues from His free-will and absolute wisdom; He is able to fulfil it, as no power can repel His judgement. Indeed, nothing takes place in the universe except as He wills.

Thus, the fulfilment of God's promise is part of the overall universal law that is subject to no alteration. Yet, *"most people do not know it,"* even though they may appear to be great scientists who have a firm grasp and wide scope of knowledge. The fact is that their knowledge is superficial, related to what is apparent in life. It does not extend to basic laws and rules, and cannot comprehend their interrelations: *"They only know the outer surface of this world's life."* They cannot penetrate any deeper than this outer surface or fathom what lies beyond it. This outer surface of the

present life is very limited, even though it may appear to us to be wide and vast. Only a small part of it occupies all their efforts. They cannot learn all that is related to that small part even when they devote their entire lives to it. Still, this world's life is only a small part of the great universe which is run in accordance with laws and rules operating throughout it all.

A person who cannot relate to the depths of the universe and its operative laws will inevitably fail to see even though he looks. He will only see the outer shape and movement, but will fail to recognize the wisdom behind it or interact with it. Most people fall into this category, because it is only true faith that links what appears on life's surface with universal secrets. It is only that which gives knowledge its spirit that can look into these secrets. Believers who have such true faith are few among the worlds' population. Hence, the great majority of people are incapable of acquiring true knowledge.

"Whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verse 7) The hereafter is another stage in the chain of creation; it is one of the many pages of the universe. People who do not understand the wisdom of creation or the law governing the universe remain unaware of the life to come, unable to give it its true measure and value. They do not realize that it is a part of the way of the universe and, as such, will never fail.

To be unaware of the hereafter makes all measures such people use inaccurate, and their values suspect. They cannot correctly appreciate life's events and values. Their knowledge of life remains superficial, incomplete. When anyone takes the hereafter and its life into account, his perspective and the way he looks at all events in this life changes. He realizes that his life on earth is but a short stage in his journey through the universe, and his lot in this present life is but a small portion of his share in the universe. He feels that all events that take place on earth are no more than a brief act in a long play on the universal stage. To base one's judgement on a short stage, a small portion or a brief act is unwise and can only lead to error.

The person who believes in the life to come and takes it into account will not be able to see eye to eye on anything with someone whose cares and interests are only for this present life. So much so that they will not be able to agree in judging a single event or question. They have two different viewpoints and perspectives; they look at things in different lights. One of them sees only the outer surface of this present life and the other looks at the bonds, laws and rules that are behind things, taking into account not only what we see in our world, but what lies beyond our perception, life and death, the present life and the life to come, and the universe stretching into the limitless. It is to such a great horizon that Islam wants humanity to look up. It is this broad perspective that befits man, the creature God has honoured when He placed him in charge of the earth.

An Invitation to Reflect

As both God's promise of victory and the certainty of the life to come are related to the truth upon which the universe is founded, the *sūrah* takes us on a round through the universe and through the depths of our own souls. It wants people to appreciate this fundamental truth which they overlook when they remain unmindful of the life to come:

> *Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord.* (Verse 8)

Their very nature and the nature of the universe around them suggest that this whole existence is based on the truth and its consistent, unchanging laws that do not permit friction or conflict. They follow neither blind coincidence, nor changing desires. The whole universe operates according to the accurate system God has put in place for it.

It is a requirement of this truth that there should be a second life when reward for action is given, with good deeds being granted handsome reward while evil ones are fairly and fully requited. Yet everything takes place at its appointed time, without a moment's hurry or delay. That people do not know the timing of the Last Hour does not mean that it will not come. The fact that its time is unknown, however, tempts those who are deluded by the little they know of the outer surface of this life: *"Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord."* (Verse 8)

The *sūrah* then takes us on a different round, looking deep in history so as to reflect on the operation of God's laws that never change:

> *Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (Verses 9-10)*

This is an invitation to carefully consider the fates of past communities. These were ordinary people belonging to God's creation. The ends they met indicate what ends await present and future generations, since God's laws are applicable to all, and they are part of the universal truth that does not favour any particular generation, nor make allowances for changing desires. Far be it from God to do so. This

invitation wants people to understand the truth of life and its bonds, and the true nature of humanity which has the same origin and the same end throughout all generations. Thus, no single generation can look at itself or its life, values and concepts in isolation, heedless of the strong bond between all human generations, the laws that apply to them all and the values that remain valid throughout human life.

Those past generations lived before the Arab unbelievers in Makkah. They were superior in power to those Arabs, *"and they cultivated the earth,"* opened it up and discovered its treasures, *"and built it up even better than these are doing."* They had a higher standard of civilization than the Arabs and were better able to raise life standards. Yet they confined themselves to the outer surface of the life of this world, not delving beyond it. *"To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth,"* but they did not open their eyes and minds to such evidence. They refused to believe and so deprived themselves of the light that illuminates the way. Hence, God's law of dealing with communities that refuse to believe applied to them. Neither their power, nor knowledge, nor civilization were of any avail to them. They had their fair retribution: *"It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves."* (Verse 9) *"But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil."* (Verse 10) Since they entertained evil, evil was their end. This was the right recompense for *"denying God's revelations and deriding them."* (Verse 10)

The Qur'ān invites those who deny God's revelations to travel on earth so that they do not remain confined to their own locality. They must reflect on the ends met by those earlier communities and realize what their own end could be. They should know that God's law applies to all without favouritism. They should open their minds to the fact that humanity is one, the divine message is one and the laws that apply to all generations of humanity are the same. This is the concept Islam is keen to instil in the minds and hearts of all believers. Hence, it is repeatedly stated in the Qur'ān.

Two Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* then speaks about the truth of resurrection, of which they remain heedless, when it is part of the great truth upon which the universe is based: *"God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return."* (Verse 11) This is a clear and simple truth, with the link and harmony between its two parts or stages also abundantly clear. Bringing back creation is the same as its origination: the two are inseparable parts in the chain of creation, while the ultimate return is to the Lord of all the worlds who initially originates then brings them back so as to remunerate them for their actions in the final stage.

As the *sūrah* speaks of resurrection, it portrays a scene of the Day of Judgement,

painting the fates of believers and unbelievers when they are returned to life. It shows the absurdity of associating partners with God and the stupidity of the unbelievers' beliefs:

> *When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. And when the Last Hour strikes, they will all be divided: as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment.* (Verses 12-16)

So the Last Hour, of which some people remain heedless while others deny it, arrives, and the guilty stand in despair, with no hope of salvation. They cannot hope for even a word of intercession by the false deities they claimed to be partners with God. They are without support and without a saviour. At that moment, they deny the false deities they claimed to be God's partners.

Hence we see the parting of the ways between believers and unbelievers: *"As for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight."* (Verse 15) There they receive what gives them true happiness. However, *"as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment."* (Verse 16) Thus, we see the end of the journey and the outcome for both the believers and those who do evil.

The *sūrah* then paints other scenes of the universe and life, highlighting some of the wonders of creation, the depths of the human soul, and miraculous events. This round starts with acknowledging God's limitless glory as the night and day succeed each other, and extolling God's praise at night and during the glorious day:

> *Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In*

> *this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 17-27)

These verses represent a great tour far and wide into the universe, showing the human heart the approaching evening, the breaking of dawn, the skies, the earth, the night and the day. It calls on the human mind to reflect on the continuous cycle of life and death, as well as the first origins of man and the inclinations, desires and powers implanted in his nature, as also the bonds between the two sexes. It turns its attention to the great sign God has placed in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the great differences in language and colour according to place and environment. It highlights the different situations of man: sleep, awareness, rest and tiredness; as well as different world phenomena such as lightning, rain and the feeling of awe and hope they generate, and the life they bring to the earth. This great tour leads man's heart in the end to the truth that the skies and the earth stand firm by God's command, while all that lives in the heavens and the earth belong to Him. It concludes by restating the simple truth that now appears in absolute clarity: that it is God who originates and brings back, and that bringing creation back to life is easier for Him.

The Cycle of Life and Death

"Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon." (Verses 17-18) This glorification and praise of God are stated here in comment on the previous section that shows a scene of the Day of Judgement when the believers win the prize of entry into heaven while those who disbelieve are brought to witness their own suffering. They also serve as an introduction to the great tour that immediately follows. They thus provide a smooth link between the previous scene and the forthcoming tour.

The *sūrah* mentions that glorification and praise are made at certain times: evening, morning, night and noon, and also links these to the heavens and the earth. Thus, it encompasses both time and place in their great dimensions, establishing the

bond between the human heart and God in all times and places, making us feel this bond as we move with the great cycle that is the universe. Thus our hearts remain open, alert, appreciating all that is around us of scenes and phenomena. Every change of time and place reminds us to glorify God and extol His praises.

"He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life." (Verse 19) It is a continuous cycle that never stops for a moment of the night or day at any place on earth, in space, or the depths of the sea. At every moment this great miracle occurs, but we remain heedless of it because of our long familiarity with it. Not a moment passes by without a life coming out of a dead thing, or a living being dying: a small bud shoots out of a seed or splits a stone to come into a life; or conversely a branch or a tree withers away. Still in the heap of dying plants and trees a seed or a stone is ready to start the life cycle again, and out of that heap gases spread into the air or provide nourishment to the soil that becomes fertile. At every moment life starts in a foetus, a bird or an animal. A corpse buried in the earth becomes part of the soil and gives it vapours and gases that make new life matter and nourishment for plants, which in turn provide food for man and animal. A similar cycle takes place in the depths of the sea and in limitless space. It is an awesome, fascinating cycle if we would only contemplate it with insight, guided by the light of the Qur'ān.

"Likewise shall you be raised to life." (Verse 19) It is all an ordinary, simple matter, familiar in the universe, occurring at every moment of the night and day and in all places.

"One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide." (Verse 20) Dust, which is the first origin of man, is dead, motionless. Another verse states: *"Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay."* (23: 12) Clay, then, is the distant origin of man, but in this verse, only a brief reference is made to this before we see people spreading and moving about. The *sūrah* thus provides a sharp contrast between the dead dust and living people. As this immediately follows the verse that includes, *"He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive,"* it enhances harmony in the argument's presentation.

This great miracle is one of the signs of God's power. It gives a strong hint of the close link between the earth and the people living on it, as it is from the earth that they were originally formed. Both they and the earth are subject to the same laws within the universal system. The great leap from the still image of dead dust to the bustling image of the highly sophisticated human being should encourage deep reflection on God's power of creation. It should encourage people to extol God's glory and praise.

The next verse looks at the shared life between the two sexes: *"And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think."* (Verse 21) People are well aware of their feelings towards the other sex; indeed, they are often preoccupied with this relationship. Very often they are motivated to a certain action but they seldom remember that it is God who created their spouses out of their own kind and gave them emotions and feelings. He it is who has made the relationship between the two a source of physical and emotional comfort, stability, spiritual friendship, and reassurance for both. The gentle Qur'ānic expression of this relationship profoundly inspires our hearts: *"so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you."* (Verse 21)

"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think." (Verse 21) When people think and reflect, they appreciate the divine wisdom in creating each of the two sexes in such a way that is complementary to the other, providing fulfilment for natural needs whether psychological, mental or physical. Thus both incline towards each other and find comfort and stability, tenderness and reassurance, love and compassion. This is so because God has made the physical and mental constitution of each naturally inclined to fulfil the needs of the other, while their meeting and union ensures the beginning of a new life for a new generation.

Man and the Universe

"And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge." (Verse 22) The Qur'ān frequently mentions the great sign of creating the heavens and the earth, but we often pass it by without reflection, although it merits long contemplation.

When the Qur'ān mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth it actually refers to this great expanse of the universe, with its fine and elaborate system, of which we know only very little. It includes countless numbers of planets, stars, orbits, celestial bodies and galaxies, in relation to which our earth seems no more than a weightless particle. This great and limitless expanse is coupled with remarkable harmony between its celestial bodies, orbits and motions, as well as the distances between them, ensuring that no collision occurs haphazardly, and that everything is kept functioning according to a set measure. This, however, relates to size and system. As for the essence of these great creatures, their respective natures, qualities, what occurs in or on them, the major laws that protect and regulate them, and how their affairs are conducted — these are beyond any human being's

knowledge. What we know of all this is very scanty indeed. In fact, our study of the small planet on which we live remains at a very elementary stage.

This is just a cursory look at the great sign that is the creation of the heavens and the earth. Very often though we speak about this carelessly, in passing, yet at the same time we speak at great length, expressing amazement and admiration, about a small machine scientists make. Yet the harmony the latter achieves between its component parts is such that it only works in unison for a short span of time. Still some people who are lost in error claim that this great universe, with its fine and elaborate systems, exists without a Creator. Not only so, but such people find scientists who are prepared to listen to such absurdity!

Together with the great sign of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the *sūrah* mentions the amazing variety of human languages and colours. This must be related to the creation of the universe. Differences in climate and environment that result from the variations of the earth's position in the cosmos have a marked influence in producing such variety in language and colour, despite the single origin of mankind. Scholars and scientists today note the great variety of human languages and colours but they do not relate this to God and His creation of the heavens and the earth. Instead, they undertake an academic study of this phenomenon, but do not pause to glorify the Creator who plans everything, visible or hidden. This is due to the fact that most people are devoid of knowledge: *"they only know the outer surface of this world's life."* (Verse 7) Besides, the wonders of the creation of the universe and the great variety of language and colour are only appreciated by those who have true knowledge: *"In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge."* (Verse 22)

"And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen." (Verse 23) This verse mentions certain universal phenomena and their effects on the different situations of mankind, pointing to the harmony within the great universal existence. It combines the two phenomena of night and day with people's sleep and activity in pursuit of their livelihoods, which God grants in abundance. God has ensured that their lives are in harmony with the universe: their need for work and activity is ensured by the light of day, and their need for relaxation and sleep is brought about by the night's darkness. This also applies, in varying measures and degrees, to all living things on earth. They all find the universal system meets their needs and natures, allowing their lives to progress. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen."* (Verse 23) Sleep and movement are two conditions that are felt through hearing. Thus, the comment at the end of the verse fits well with the universal sign it discusses.

"And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear

and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason." (Verse 24) The phenomenon of lightning is part of the universal system. Some explain that it occurs from an electrical discharge between two clouds, or between a cloud and the ground, such as the top of a mountain, producing an air vacuum that gives the thunder that follows the lightning. In most cases, this is accompanied by rain. Whatever the cause, lightning is a natural phenomenon produced by the universal system God has set in operation.

As usual, the Qur'ān does not give much detail about universal phenomena and their causes. It only uses these to establish a link between human hearts, the universe and its Creator. Hence, it states here that one of God's signs is that He displays the lightning *"giving rise to both fear and hope."* Both feelings are naturally experienced when lightning occurs. People fear a thunderbolt that results from lightning, one that could burn things and even people. There is also that obscure feeling of apprehension which lightning causes as people feel the presence of the great power that controls the universe. People also hope for plentiful harvests as a result of the rain that often accompanies thunder and lightning. Hence, it is mentioned in the same verse: *"He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless."* (Verse 24)

When life and death are applied to the earth, it makes the earth appear as a living entity which lives and dies. It is indeed so, as described by the Qur'ān. The universe is a living entity that feels and responds. It obeys its Lord, the Creator of all, and it glorifies Him in complete submission. Man, who lives on earth, is one of God's creatures, all of whom look up to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Moreover, when water falls on earth, it makes it fertile, allowing plants to grow, so as to make its surface come alive first with vegetation, then with animals and man. Water is the means of life; wherever it is available, life prospers. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason."* (Verse 24) There is indeed much scope for people's minds to reflect.

"And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise." (Verse 25) The fact that the skies and the earth stand firm, following an elaborate system and moving according to plan, cannot come about except through God's will. No one can ever claim that either he or anyone else brings this about, or that it happens without a plan. Hence, it is God's great sign that the skies and the earth stand firm and function by His command, obeying Him, without deviation, hesitation or delay.

"Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise."

(Verse 25) No one who sees the great and elaborate system of the universe, how it functions, and the power that controls its potentials and resources, will entertain any doubt that humans, weak as they are, will immediately respond to the great Creator's order to rise from their graves.

The final note that concludes this statement shows that all creatures in the heavens and the earth submit to God in complete obedience: *"To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him."* (Verse 26) Although most people are neither devout nor obedient to God, the Qur'ānic statement here means that all creatures in the universe are subject to His will. All act and function in accordance with His laws that never fail or deviate from their set course. They are subject to these laws even though they may be unbelievers. It is their hearts and minds that disbelieve or disobey, but they are nevertheless governed by God's laws, and He controls them as He does all other creatures. They have no option but to obey and submit.

This great tour concludes by restating the essential question which people remain heedless of, namely resurrection: *"It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) The *sūrah* has already mentioned the initiation of creation and bringing creatures back to life after they had died. Now this is repeated after mentioning a galaxy of God's signs, but there is also an addition here, *"and most easy is this for Him."* (Verse 27) There is indeed nothing that is easier or more difficult for God: *"When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, Be' — and it is."* (36: 82) The Qur'ān addresses people in a way they understand. According to their own standards, initiating creation should be more difficult than bringing it back to life. Why, then, should they deem it difficult for God when by the nature of things it should be easier?

"His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth." (Verse 27) His attributes are not shared with anyone else. Nothing is similar to Him in any way. *"He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) He does what He wills, having sway over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of all His creation.

An Analogy Drawn from Human Life

When the human heart has seen God's great signs, gone over such horizons and looked at such a great variety of situations, the *sūrah* then changes the tone of its address:

> *He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on*

> *you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason.* (Verse 28)

This comparison is drawn for people who used to associate partners with God. All the more so when such alleged partners are part of His creation, be they *jinn,* angels, idols, trees, etc. People themselves do not accept that their slaves have any share in their property. Indeed, they will not treat their slaves as equal to them in any sense. Thus, this situation is singular indeed. They make some of God's creatures partners with Him when He alone is the Creator and the Provider for all. Furthermore, they refuse to accept their slaves as partners in their property when their property is given to them by God who creates it. The contradiction in their attitude is stark indeed.

This comparison is stated in detail, step by step: *"He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life."* You do not need to travel or make an effort to contemplate it. *"Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it?"* You do not accept that your slaves have even a small share of your provisions, let alone that they be equal to you. *"And you would fear them just as you might fear one another?" You* look at them in the same way as you look at partners who are free men, fearing that they might be unfair to you, or that you be unfair to them. Although none of this happens, you still suggest that it applies to God when His are the most sublime attributes in the heavens and the earth. It is a simple comparison that admits no contradiction or dispute because it is based on simple logic: *"Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason."* (Verse 28)

The *sūrah* now exposes the basic reason behind this anomaly. Essentially, it is due to following one's own desires without reasonable basis or proper thought: *"Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 29) Desire has no control, since it is merely based on people's whims, fleeting passions, fears, hopes and cravings that have no rightful basis and no proper limit. This is a case of error that lacks any correcting guidance: *"Who could guide those whom God has let go astray?" They* go astray because they follow their own desires. *"They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 29)

Concluding Directive

Now the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to remain steady in following the divine faith which is consistent and based on the pure nature God has given to people. It is a single faith that cannot be pulled in different directions, like the unbelievers who

were divided into groups and factions according to their desires.

> *Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold.* (Verses 30-32)

This directive to follow the true faith is given at the right time and the proper place, following the great round of signs drawn from the universe and the human soul. It thus addresses hearts that are ready to receive it, while those that have followed deviant beliefs find all their arguments devoid of substance. They stand alone without support. This is the powerful authority that is the Qur'ān and which no heart or mind can resist.

"Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false," and move straight towards it, for it protects you from the influence of divergent desires that have no right basis and which rely on no true knowledge. They are subject only to whim and passion, lacking control or evidence. When you set your face steadily towards true faith, you turn away from everything else. This is *"in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man."* (Verse 30) Thus the *sūrah* links human nature with the nature of this faith. Both are made by God, in accordance with the law of existence; both are mutually harmonious in their natures and objectives. It is God who has created man and revealed this religion so that it can regulate human life and conduct its affairs, healing man of ills and deviation. God certainly knows best what He has created. Human nature is set on a firm basis, and so is divine religion. *"Nothing can change God's creation."* When people deviate from the proper path of nature, only divine religion turns them back to it, since it is in full harmony with both human and universal nature. *"Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it."* Because they do not know, they follow their desires and deviate from the true path that leads to true happiness.

Although this directive to set his face towards the right faith is given to the Prophet, it is meant for all believers. Therefore, the *sūrah* continues its directives, explaining the meaning of setting one's face towards the right faith: *"Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God- fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold."* (Verses 31-32) This means turning to God and referring to Him in all matters. This is what it is to be God-fearing, alert to what pleases Him in all that we do, whether in public or in private. It also means

attending regularly to our prayer in full devotion to God. It means, above all, believing firmly in His absolute oneness, which is the characteristic that distinguishes believers from unbelievers.

The *sūrah* describes the unbelievers as *"those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects."* (Verse 32) Unbelief and associating partners with God may take many forms and patterns. Some unbelievers consider the *jinn* to be God's partners, others associate the angels, some their forefathers, while others take kings, rulers, priests, rabbis, trees, stones, planets, stars, the fire, night and day, false values, desires, and the like as partners with God. The forms and patterns are unending, yet *"each group is delighted with what they hold."* (Verse 32) Meanwhile, the true faith is one, unchanging and undivided. It leads its followers towards God alone, at whose command the skies and the earth are set firm, and to whom belong all those who are in the heavens and the earth. All devoutly submit themselves to Him.

2
Bringing Life out of the Dead

When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, (33)

وَإِذَا مَسَّ ٱلنَّاسَ ضُرّٞ دَعَوۡاْ رَبَّهُم مُّنِيبِينَ
إِلَيۡهِ ثُمَّ إِذَآ أَذَاقَهُم مِّنۡهُ رَحۡمَةً إِذَا فَرِيقٞ
مِّنۡهُم بِرَبِّهِمۡ يُشۡرِكُونَ ٣٣

[as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (34)

لِيَكۡفُرُواْ بِمَآ ءَاتَيۡنَٰهُمۡۚ فَتَمَتَّعُواْ فَسَوۡفَ
تَعۡلَمُونَ ٣٤

Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? (35)

أَمۡ أَنزَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ سُلۡطَٰنٗا فَهُوَ يَتَكَلَّمُ بِمَا
كَانُواْ بِهِۦ يُشۡرِكُونَ ٣٥

When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. (36)

وَإِذَآ أَذَقۡنَا ٱلنَّاسَ رَحۡمَةٗ فَرِحُواْ بِهَاۖ وَإِن
تُصِبۡهُمۡ سَيِّئَةُۢ بِمَا قَدَّمَتۡ أَيۡدِيهِمۡ إِذَا هُمۡ
يَقۡنَطُونَ ٣٦

Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe. (37)

أَوَلَمۡ يَرَوۡاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَبۡسُطُ ٱلرِّزۡقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ
وَيَقۡدِرُۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَأٓيَٰتٖ لِّقَوۡمٖ يُؤۡمِنُونَ
٣٧

Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need. This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful. (38)

فَـَٔاتِ ذَا ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُۥ وَٱلْمِسْكِينَ وَٱبْنَ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ
وَجْهَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase. (39)

وَمَآ ءَاتَيْتُم مِّن رِّبًا لِّيَرْبُوَا۟ فِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِ
ٱلنَّاسِ فَلَا يَرْبُوا۟ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ وَمَآ ءَاتَيْتُم
مِّن زَكَوٰةٍ تُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَ ٱللَّهِ فَأُو۟لَـٰٓئِكَ
هُمُ ٱلْمُضْعِفُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. (40)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ رَزَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ
يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ۖ هَلْ مِن شُرَكَآئِكُم
مَّن يَفْعَلُ مِن ذَٰلِكُم مِّن شَىْءٍ ۚ سُبْحَـٰنَهُۥ
وَتَعَـٰلَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. (41)

ظَهَرَ ٱلْفَسَادُ فِى ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ
أَيْدِى ٱلنَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُم بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى
عَمِلُوا۟ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.' (42)

قُلْ سِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ كَانَ
عَـٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلُ ۚ كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم
مُّشْرِكِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: (43)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ ٱلْقَيِّمِ مِن قَبْلِ أَن
يَأْتِيَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُۥ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ۖ يَوْمَئِذٍ
يَصَّدَّعُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. (44)

مَن كَفَرَ فَعَلَيْهِ كُفْرُهُۥ ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا
فَلِأَنفُسِهِمْ يَمْهَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers. (45)

لِيَجْزِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
مِن فَضْلِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. (46)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ أَن يُرْسِلَ ٱلرِّيَاحَ مُبَشِّرَٰتٍ
وَلِيُذِيقَكُم مِّن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَلِتَجْرِيَ ٱلْفُلْكُ
بِأَمْرِهِۦ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. (47)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ رُسُلًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِمْ
فَجَآءُوهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ
أَجْرَمُوا۟ ۖ وَكَانَ حَقًّا عَلَيْنَا نَصْرُ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, (48)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى يُرۡسِلُ ٱلرِّيَٰحَ فَتُثِيرُ سَحَابٗا
فَيَبۡسُطُهُۥ فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ كَيۡفَ يَشَآءُ وَيَجۡعَلُهُۥ
كِسَفٗا فَتَرَى ٱلۡوَدۡقَ يَخۡرُجُ مِنۡ خِلَٰلِهِۦۖ
فَإِذَآ أَصَابَ بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنۡ عِبَادِهِۦٓ إِذَا
هُمۡ يَسۡتَبۡشِرُونَ ٤٨

even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. (49)

وَإِن كَانُواْ مِن قَبۡلِ أَن يُنَزَّلَ عَلَيۡهِم مِّن
قَبۡلِهِۦ لَمُبۡلِسِينَ ٤٩

Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.(50)

فَٱنظُرۡ إِلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِ رَحۡمَتِ ٱللَّهِ كَيۡفَ يُحۡيِ
ٱلۡأَرۡضَ بَعۡدَ مَوۡتِهَآۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحۡيِ
ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰۖ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ قَدِيرٞ ٥٠

If We send a [scorching] wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth. (51)

وَلَئِنۡ أَرۡسَلۡنَا رِيحٗا فَرَأَوۡهُ مُصۡفَرّٗا لَّظَلُّواْ مِنۢ
بَعۡدِهِۦ يَكۡفُرُونَ ٥١

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (52)

فَإِنَّكَ لَا تُسۡمِعُ ٱلۡمَوۡتَىٰ وَلَا تُسۡمِعُ ٱلصُّمَّ
ٱلدُّعَآءَ إِذَا وَلَّوۡاْ مُدۡبِرِينَ ٥٢

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (53)

وَمَآ أَنتَ بِهَٰدِ ٱلۡعُمۡيِ عَن ضَلَٰلَتِهِمۡۖ إِن
تُسۡمِعُ إِلَّا مَن يُؤۡمِنُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا فَهُم
مُّسۡلِمُونَ ٥٣

It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. (54)

۞ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن ضَعْفٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ضَعْفٍ قُوَّةً ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ قُوَّةٍ ضَعْفًا وَشَيْبَةً ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَآءُ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ٱلْقَدِيرُ ﴿٥٤﴾

When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. (55)

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ يُقْسِمُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ مَا لَبِثُوا۟ غَيْرَ سَاعَةٍ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ كَانُوا۟ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' (56)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ وَٱلْإِيمَـٰنَ لَقَدْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِى كِتَـٰبِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْبَعْثِ ۖ فَهَـٰذَا يَوْمُ ٱلْبَعْثِ وَلَـٰكِنَّكُمْ كُنتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (57)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يَنفَعُ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: 'you are but making false claims.'

وَلَقَدْ ضَرَبْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِى هَـٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ وَلَئِن جِئْتَهُم بِـَٔايَةٍ لَّيَقُولَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟ إِنْ أَنتُمْ إِلَّا مُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

(58)

كَذَٰلِكَ يَطۡبَعُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ ٱلَّذِينَ
لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٥٩

Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth]. (59)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞۖ وَلَا
يَسۡتَخِفَّنَّكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُوقِنُونَ ٦٠

Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind. (60)

Overview

This section of the *sūrah* follows its main line, looking at the universal expanse to which people's lives and events are related. It is in this great expanse that we see how the laws governing life and the universe operate in harmony with the laws of the true faith, suffering no conflict or contradiction.

This section draws an image of how human desires frequently change while God's rules and laws remain constant. It shows how flimsy idolatrous beliefs are compared with the power of true faith. It describes people's attitudes in times of ease and hardship, when provisions are plentiful and stinted. Unless people rely on God's measure, which never fluctuates, and unless they accept God's will who gives as He pleases, in plenty or in small measure, their values and standards will remain unstable. Since it mentions the provision of sustenance, the *sūrah* directs them to the means that purifies money and makes it grow, which is in line with true faith. In this way, it makes clear to them who the Creator that gives sustenance, initiates life and causes death is. The false deities they allege to be God's partners do nothing of the kind. It alerts them to the corruption that idolatry and false beliefs spread everywhere.

The *sūrah* directs the Prophet and Muslims to remain steadfast in following the true faith before there comes a day when no action is of any use. It is the day when everything people have done is reckoned and when they receive their fair reward for it all. Within the context of what God provides, the *sūrah* directs their attention to certain aspects of such provisions, some of which relate to their existence, such as the rain that comes from the skies, giving life to the earth after it was dead. Likewise,

God’s revelations are given to the Prophet to bring life to hearts and souls. Yet they neither listen nor follow guidance. The *sūrah* also takes us on a round in which we look at the stages of creation of humans and their lives until they return to their Lord. At that time, no excuse or justification will benefit the wrongdoers. The *sūrah* then concludes with reassuring the Prophet. It directs him to show more patience until God’s promise is fulfilled, as it certainly will be.

Vacillating Conditions

> *When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, [as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe.* (Verses 33-37)

These verses draw a picture of the human soul that does not rely on solid concepts, or follow clear lines. It thus vacillates between sudden reactions, in response to conflicting influences or events. Thus, when harm touches such people, they turn to God, realizing that only He can save them. Yet when the affliction is over, and things are comfortable again, with God bestowing His grace on them, *“some of them associate partners with their Lord.”* (Verse 33) These are they who do not follow true faith and who do not benefit from the light it gives to the faithful. Ease and comfort remove the emergency that made them turn to God for support and protection. They forget their earlier hardship. Thus, rather than maintain the path of turning to God and of being grateful to Him, they disbelieve in His guidance and the grace He has bestowed on them.

A warning is given in the first instance to those unbelievers who opposed the Prophet’s message, making it clear that they belong to this group: *“Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know.”* (Verse 34) It is a serious threat that sends terror into their hearts. People fear threats issued by rulers or presidents. How then will they react to a threat from the Creator of this universe, He who brought it into existence by merely saying to it, ‘Be’?

Having delivered this stern warning, the *sūrah* questions them about the basis of their associating partners with God when it is He who bestows His grace upon them: *“Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with*

God?" (Verse 35) No one should ever accept anything about faith from any source other than God. So, have they received any clear, powerful argument to warrant an attitude that is contrary to belief in God's oneness? This is a rhetorical question, one that depicts the fallacy of all types of idolatry. At the same time it serves to state that the only proper and true faith is that revealed by God, with clear sanction from Him. Otherwise, it remains flimsy, devoid of substance.

The *sūrah* then depicts a different situation showing people as they euphorically rejoice at any taste of God's grace. In contrast, they feel frustrated and hopeless when affliction befalls them: *"When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope."* (Verse 36)

This is another image of a soul that either does not follow a clear line in judging situations or which lacks an accurate standard that does not sway with events. These are they who emotionally rejoice at every taste of grace forgetting its source and purpose. They are elated, overjoyed, but do not express their gratitude to the One who has granted them such grace. They do not realize that a situation of grace also poses a test. When it is God's will to requite them for their deeds, making them taste a situation of hardship, they are again blind to God's wisdom in such a test. They lose all hope that God will remove their affliction. Such is the situation of people who do not maintain their bonds with God and, consequently, do not understand His laws or wisdom. These are the ones who only know the outer surface of the life of this world.

This image is followed by another rhetorical question that wonders at their attitude and lack of insight. In both situations of grace and affliction one consistent law applies. Both are the result of God's will. It is He who bestows grace and tests people with hardship, gives in abundance or in a scant measure, in line with His wisdom. This takes place all the time, but they do not see: *"Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills?"* There is no need, then, for elation at the time of grace, or for despair during times of hardship. These are situations that befall people at different times as serves God's purpose. A believer sees in them confirmation that all matters ultimately belong to God. It all indicates the consistency of God's laws in all situations: *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe."* (Verse 37)

Since it is God who grants provisions and sustenance, giving in abundance or in small measure as He pleases, He indicates to people the way in which they can make handsome profit, increasing their wealth. This is different from what they think:

> *Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need. This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful.*

Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase. (Verses 38-39)

Since all wealth belongs to God and it is He who grants it to some of His servants, He, the original owner, has determined that a portion of it should go to certain groups, to be given to them by those who are in actual possession of it. Therefore, He calls it a right due to these groups, of which the *sūrah* mentions here *"the near of kin, the needy and the traveller in need."* At the time this *sūrah* was revealed, *zakāt* had not yet been determined, nor its beneficiaries. The principle, however, is stated clearly, making all money God's property since it is He who grants it in the first place, and assigning to certain needy groups a right which they should receive from those who are in possession of the money. This is the basic financial principle Islam lays down, from which all aspects of the Islamic economic theory derive. Since all money and wealth belong to God, it is subject to what He, as the original owner, determines with regard to how it is owned, invested or spent. The person who is in control of it does not enjoy absolute authority in this respect.

God Almighty issues this directive to those He has placed as trustees of wealth showing them the best methods for investment, growth and prosperity. This means sharing with one's near kin, the needy and stranded travellers, and spending generally in ways that serve God's cause: *"This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful."* (Verse 38)

At that time some people tried to increase their money by giving gifts to wealthy individuals, hoping that they would receive better gifts in return. The *sūrah* tells them that this is not the way to achieve true growth: *"Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God."* This is what some reports mention as the meaning of this statement, but it is a general statement that applies to all methods people use to usuriously increase their wealth.[15] God also makes clear the way that ensures true growth: *"Whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase."* (Verse 39)

This is the guaranteed way of increasing money: to give it freely, expecting no favours from anyone, but seeking only God's pleasure. Is He not the One who gives sustenance in plenty or in small measure? Is He not the One who bestows or denies favours? He, thus, gives in multiples to those who spend of their money for no reason other than to please Him. He also takes away from the usurers who seek to increase their wealth at other people's expense. One method makes its calculation by

[15] This method is not forbidden like other methods based on usury. However, it is neither a proper nor honourable way to increase wealth.

this world's standards, while the other looks at the standards of the life to come, when rewards are given in multiples. This last method is the one that makes real profits both in this life and in the life to come.

Corruption and Pollution

The *sūrah* then discusses the issue of polytheism from the viewpoint of providing sustenance and earning a living, and how this affects their lives as it affected the lives of generations before them. It also shows the end of earlier communities and the ruins standing witness to such ends:

> *It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.'* (Verses 40-42)

The *sūrah* puts before them the realities of their lives which they cannot dispute to be of God's own making and in which they cannot claim a share for their alleged deities. It tells them that it is God who has brought them into existence, provides them with sustenance, causes them to die, and then brings them back to life. They acknowledge the fact that it is God who creates them. As for sustenance, they cannot claim that their alleged deities provide them with any of it. They have no argument against what the Qur'ān states about causing death. It is the question of resurrection that they dispute. The *sūrah* includes this with other acknowledged realities so that resurrection becomes established in their consciences. The method employed in this Qur'ānic address is uniquely effective. It speaks directly to their nature, sidestepping all deviant thinking. Human nature cannot deny the fact of resurrection.

They are then asked: *"Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things?"* (Verse 40) No answer to this question is expected. Indeed, the verse puts forward the only possible and negative response in the form of a rebuke, thus doing away with the need for a direct answer. This is followed by a glorification of God which denies partnership with Him in any form: *"Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him."* (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* then makes clear that life situations are directly related to people's actions, and that when corruption finds its way into people's hearts, faiths and deeds, both land and sea also become corrupted, to the extent that corruption becomes the order of the day: *"Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought."* (Verse 41) This spreading of pollution across the land and sea does not happen by coincidence. It is a manifestation of the working of God's laws. The reason being: *"so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings."* (Verse 41) They will thus suffer the consequences of the evil they do and the corruption they spread. It is hoped that when they have done so *"they might mend their ways."* (Verse 41) They might resolve to stop corruption and return to faith and its course of action which sanctions the doing of only what is good.

At the end of this round, the *sūrah* warns them against incurring a punishment similar to what was inflicted on communities before them. They were aware of the ends met by many of those, as they used to see their ruins on their travels: *"Say: Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God."* (Verse 42) Their fates are sufficient to discourage anyone from wanting to follow in their footsteps.

Now we have a reference to the other way whose travellers will never be lost. This leads to a different horizon which never brings disappointment:

> *So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers.* (Verses 43-45)

Taking up the true faith is expressed here in an inspiring way, suggesting full and serious commitment: *"So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith."* (Verse 43) This implies full attention and clear aspiration. It looks up to a high horizon and a sublime goal. The same sort of directive was given to the Prophet in this *sūrah* when it spoke about groups and sects with divergent beliefs. It is repeated here as the *sūrah* speaks about God's alleged partners, increase in sustenance, corruption resulting from unbelief, what people suffer as a result of the spread of corruption and pollution, and the fates of those who associate partners with God. Therefore, we have a statement here of the reward expected in the life to come and what both believers and unbelievers then stand to receive. The *sūrah* warns against a day that cannot be averted. On that day, people will be divided into two great groups: *"On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves."*

(Verses 43-44)

The Arabic text uses the word *yamhad* which is given in translation as '*smoothed a way'*. In its original meaning, the word means 'prepare a place of repose, or a comfortable way to follow, a cradle.' All these connotations combine to describe good deeds and their role. A person who does good deeds actually prepares a position of comfort for himself, this at the same time he does such deeds, not later. This is the meaning the verse highlights. *"And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds."* (Verse 45) Whatever anyone receives as a reward comes out of God's bounty. No one deserves heaven on the basis of his or her actions alone. No matter what we do, we do not thank God enough for a part of what He has given us. Yet His grace continues to be bestowed on the believers. As for the unbelievers, He has no love for them: *"He certainly does not love the unbelievers."* (Verse 45)

Aspects of God's Grace

The *sūrah* begins a new round showing some of God's signs and how they reflect His grace as He provides them with sustenance and guidance. They recognize only parts of this, denying others. Nevertheless, they do not give thanks or follow His guidance:

> *And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.* (Verses 46-50)

God's signs here include the winds as heralds bearing good news, sending messengers with clear signs, giving support to believers, sending rain to give life to dead land and bringing the dead back to life. This combination is very significant. All these are aspects of God's mercy and grace, and they are all part of the laws God has set in operation. Indeed there are close links between the system of the universe, the

messages of divine guidance preached by God's messengers, and the victory granted to the believers. All these are among God's signs, and aspects of His grace. They are important to human life, and they are closely related to the universal system.

"And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news." (Verse 46) These winds herald rain. From experience, people know the winds that bring rain which raises their hopes. *"So that He might give you a taste of His grace,"* with this prospect of rain, fertility and growth. *"And that ships might sail at His bidding,"* either with the help of rain or by causing rivers to flow and allowing ships to sail on them. Yet the ships are actually run by God's bidding, according to the laws He operates in the universe, giving everything its qualities and functions. An aspect of this is that ships are easily carried by water and they float and move, pushed by the wind, either with or against the current. With Him everything is made to measure. *"So that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty,"* on your business travels, in cultivating the land, and in business exchanges. All this is part of God's bounty, given by the One who has created everything and perfectly proportioned them all so *"that you might have cause to be grateful,"* for His grace in all this. This comment at the end of the verse serves as an indication of how people should behave when they receive God's bounty.

Similar to sending the winds bearing good news is the sending of messengers with veritable signs of the truth: *"We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth."* (Verse 47) Yet people did not receive this aspect of God's grace, which is much greater and further reaching than the wind that brings the prospect of rain. Nor did they benefit by them as they did by rain, even though their messages were far more beneficial and longer lasting. Essentially, they took two different attitudes towards God's messengers. Some of them refused to believe or reflect on God's messages and continued to inflict harm on the messengers and to turn people away from God's path. Others, who believed, recognized God's signs, offered thanks for His grace, and bore with patience the harm inflicted on them by the other group. Furthermore, they were confident that God's promise would come true. The outcome was in accordance with divine justice and in fulfilment of His certain promise: *"Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers."* (Verse 47)

All glory to God Almighty who, by His grace, has committed Himself to support the believers and give them victory, making this their right. He has emphatically confirmed it in clear, unambiguous terms. How could there be any ambiguity when the One making the commitment is God Almighty who has sway over all His creatures? He makes this statement expressing His will that will always be done, and pointing to the working of His law which never fails. He is the All-Knowing, the

Wise.

God’s support may appear, in people’s reckoning, to be slow in coming, because they have a measure and a perspective that are different from His. He, in His knowledge and wisdom, fulfils His promise at the time He chooses in accordance with His law. People may or may not be able to appreciate the wisdom of His timing. Yet His will brings the best; it is His timing that is the most appropriate, and it is His promise that will most certainly be fulfilled. Believers who reflect the quality of patience in adversity await its fulfilment with unshakeable confidence.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that it is God who sends the winds, brings down the rain, gives life to the earth after it was dead, and also brings the dead back to life: it is all one law, one method and different stages in the chain of the overall universal law.

“It is God who sends forth the winds,” in accordance with the law He has set in operation to regulate the universe and its affairs. *“So that they raise clouds,”* by the vapour they carry from the surface of water bodies on earth. *“Whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up,”* allowing its pieces to gather and condense, accumulate in layers, or collide with one another, or send an electrical charge from one layer or piece to another. *“So that you can see the rain issuing from within it,”* when such clouds are heavy with rain. *“As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice.”* (Verse 48) No one knows the extent of such rejoicing better than the people for whom rain means survival. The Arabs were the first people to realize the importance of this statement, because their lives depended on rain. Their poetry and folk stories mention it with hope and endearment.

“Even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope.” (Verse 49) This describes their condition before rain. In fact, rain changes their condition completely, from despair to hope and rejoicing. *“Behold, then, the effects of God’s grace.”* You see these effects in people’s faces as they brighten up after being gloomy with despair, in the quickening earth, and in the liveliness affecting all.

“Behold, then, the effects of God’s grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless!” (Verse 50) This is a fact that needs no more than that we look and reflect. It is given here as evidence confirming the resurrection when people are brought back to life. This is consistent in the Qur’ānic argument where universal images and facts of life are given as substantial evidence: *“It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.”* (Verse 50) We need only to look at the effects of God’s grace on the earth to be certain of the truth of this eventuality and the fulfilment of this promise.

The *sūrah* then describes the feelings of those very people who are happy at seeing the wind carrying water and who rejoice as they see rain bringing God’s grace. What

would they feel, however, if they saw the winds as yellowish in colour carrying dust and sand? Such winds destroy fields and livestock, or cause plants to dry and wither: *"If We send a [scorching' wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth."* (Verse 51) Rather than submitting to God's will and praying to Him earnestly to remove their affliction, they deny the truth out of frustration and despair. This is the status of people who do not believe in God or His will, of people who cannot discern God's wisdom in what He decides, and cannot appreciate that it is God's hand that determines everything in the universe, ensuring harmony between all its events and situations.

The Different Stages of Man's Life

Thus the *sūrah* describes the fluctuation of people's desires, their inability to benefit by God's signs that they see in the universe around them, and their failure to recognize God's wisdom behind life's events. It then addresses the Prophet consoling him for not being able to persuade many of them to follow divine guidance. It tells him that this is due to their nature and blindness, which he can never cure.

> *Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God].* (Verses 52-53)

The *sūrah* shows them to be lifeless, deaf and blind, devoid of motion, hearing and sight. They have isolated themselves from the world around them and thus they are unable to understand the universal laws affecting it. Hence, they have no more than an animal life, or even less. An animal is guided by its nature, which rarely lets it down. By contrast, a person who does not respond to God's revelations despite its powerful effect on hearts and minds is deaf even though he may have ears that hear. Similarly, the one who does not see God's signs placed everywhere in the world around him is blind, even though he may have functioning eyes.

"You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves (to God]." (Verse 53) These are the ones who listen to the divine message because they have active minds and hearts, as well as sound understanding. When they listen to the divine message, they realize that it is the truth and they declare their submission to Him. They only need that their nature be alerted, and they respond.

The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round, but this time it is within ourselves looking at the different stages of our life on earth, before it refers to the next life and

the close link between the two:

> *It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends.* (Verses 54-57)

They see the beginnings in their own life, and they see the end brought to them in a vivid image as though it were happening before their very eyes. They only need to have a receptive mind to gather the inspiration behind these verses.

"It is God who creates you in a state of weakness." Literally, this is given in Arabic as "it is God who creates you from weakness," which suggests to the Arabic reader that weakness is the substance from which man is made. The weakness in man's formation meant here has several aspects to it. It includes the physical weakness of the single, tiny cell that makes the foetus which goes through several stages, remaining weak throughout all of them. This weakness continues during childhood, until the person reaches adolescence and the prime of youth. Another weakness is that of the substance from which man is made, which is clay. Had it not been for the breath of God's spirit, man would have remained in the physical image of clay or in an animal image. Both of these are very weak compared to man. There is also the psychological weakness that makes man yield to desire, passion and lust. It is again the breathing of God's spirit into him that gives him the ability and resolve to resist such emotions. Without this spirit man would have been weaker than animals which behave according to their natures.

"It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you." The strength mentioned here covers all those aspects discussed under weakness: strength in physical build, human potential, mental ability and psychological constitution. *"And then after strength he brings about your weakness and old age."* Again this new weakness applies to the whole human constitution. Old age is a decline into childhood in all aspects. It may be accompanied with psychological decline due to weakness of will. An old person may have an urge similar to that of a child without having the willpower to resist it. The Arabic word *shaybah,* translated here as 'old age' also connotes 'grey hair'. It is specially selected here to give a tangible impression of old age.

No one escapes these stages. They never fail to affect anyone who survives; nor are they ever slow so as to come later than usual. These stages confirm that mankind is subject to a greater will that creates and determines as it pleases. That is the will of God who determines the age, life and stages of every creature in accordance with perfect knowledge and elaborate planning: *"He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power."* (Verse 54)

This well-regulated creation must certainly have a well-regulated end. Indeed, this is shown in a scene from the Day of Judgement that is full of movement and dialogue to bring it alive before our eyes: *"When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour."* (Verse 55) Thus, all that has passed before that day shrinks into insignificance so as to make them swear that they had not lived on earth more than one hour. Their oaths may also be taken to mean that they did not stay in their graves for more than an hour, or that this duration of one hour applies to all their time on earth in both their conditions of life and death. *"Thus they used to delude themselves."* They could not make a proper estimate of their time, until those who have true knowledge tell them the right duration: *"But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it."* (Verse 56)

Most probably the ones described as *'endowed with knowledge'* are the believers who were certain of the coming of the Last Hour, recognizing what lies beyond the apparent aspects of the life of this world. These are the ones who have true knowledge and enlightened faith. In their answer, they refer the matter to God's knowledge: *"You have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection."* This is the term appointed, and it does not matter whether it was of a long or short duration. The appointed time was met: *"This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it."* (Verse 56)

The scene is completed with a general statement of the overall result, referring to the fate of the wrongdoers who denied the Day of Judgement: *"And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends."* (Verse 57) No justification will be accepted from them. In fact no acknowledgement of error or apology is sought from them. That is the Day of Judgement and punishment of the guilty, not a day of providing justification for wrong action.

No Change of Position

The *sūrah* then describes how the unbelievers persist in their ways, after having explained the fate of such persistent unbelief:

> *We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims.' Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth].* (Verses 58-59)

There is a wide gap here in time and place, but it sounds in the *sūrah* as if it is ever so near; indeed both time and place have been rolled back. People are again reminded of what the Qur'ān provides by way of illustrations, modes of address, fine touches meant to alert minds and hearts, and inspiring images. They listen to it as it addresses every mind and heart in every social environment and speaks to the human soul in all its moods. Yet they continue to deny every sign. Nor do they stop at this, but rather insult those endowed with true knowledge describing them as making false assertions: *"Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims."* (Verse 58) The *sūrah* comments on their disbelief, saying: *"Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth]."* (Verse 59) It is in this way and for this reason that God seals their hearts. They are indeed blind, unable to see God's signs, arrogant in their disbelief, unwilling to reflect. Hence, they deserve that God should seal their sight and their hearts.

The final note in the *sūrah* comes in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers: *"Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind."* (Verse 60)

Perseverance is the best policy for the believers as they go along their hard, long way that at times seems endless. They must remain confident of the fulfilment of God's promise. This will enable them to remain steadfast, free of worry and doubt. Other people may hesitate, or deny the truth, or doubt that God's promise will ever be fulfilled, because they have no true knowledge and lack the means of certainty. Believers, however, must persevere, remain steadfast and confident, even though their path may seem endless, and their goal seem concealed behind thick clouds.

Thus the *sūrah* that started with God's promise to grant victory to the Byzantines within a few years, and give support and victory to the believers, now ends with the directive to persevere until God's promise is fulfilled. Believers are instructed to remain steadfast in the face of all the unbelievers' attempts to weaken their resolve. There is perfect harmony between the opening and the end. As it concludes, the lingering impression is that of a firm resolve and unshaken trust that God's promise will be fulfilled.

SŪRAH 31

Luqmān

Prologue

The Qur'ān addresses human nature with its own logic. It was revealed from on high by the One who created human nature. He knows what suits it and brings the best out of it. He also knows how to address it and what affects its inner thoughts and feelings. The Qur'ān explains to human nature the truth that is deeply ingrained in it, which it knew long before it was addressed by the Qur'ān, because it was initially created with it. This is the truth of acknowledging God as the Creator, the One, the Supreme, and offering worship to Him alone. Similarly, the entire universe glorifies and praises Him at all times. The problem is that certain aspects of life on earth, some physical impulses, desires, whims and cravings may cloud human nature's vision or force its deviation from the right path. Therefore, the Qur'ān addresses our nature with the logic it knows, presenting to it the truth that it has overlooked. In this way, it moulds human nature on the basis of its code for living, leading it to earn the pleasure of God, the Creator who controls everything.

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* provides an example of how the Qur'ān addresses our hearts. It tackles the question of faith among the idolaters who had deviated from the truth. This is indeed the overall issue that all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah tackle, albeit in a variety of ways and from different angles. That the Qur'ān employs such different means is an essential part of its method to keep our hearts on the alert.

The central issue of faith focuses in this *sūrah* on God's oneness. It demonstrates how we should address worship to Him alone, express gratitude for His blessings, establish firm belief in the hereafter and what this involves of careful reckoning and just reward. Believers should also follow what God has revealed and abandon all notions that are at variance with this.

The *sūrah* presents this whole issue in a way that invites reflection on the remarkable approach of the Qur'ān. It addresses our natures and our hearts. All who advocate faith should study this approach carefully.

The issue of faith is presented here against the backdrop of the entire universe: its skies, earth, sun and moon, night and day, seas and atmosphere, waves and rain, plants and trees, etc. This colossal background is frequently employed in the Qur'ān, so as to make the universe a host of clear signs placed all around us, speaking to our hearts and minds, bringing them alive.

Four Presentations of One Issue

Although the issue is one, and the background is the same, it is presented in this *sūrah* four times in four sections. In each the *sūrah* takes us around the great expanse of the universe, picking up new influences and using new styles. Looking carefully at these four presentations, and how each starts and finishes in a remarkable way is especially pleasant and encourages a positive response.

The first begins immediately after the three separate letters that begin the *sūrah.* These indicate that the *sūrah* is composed of such letters, and that it is from these that verses of this book are presented packed with wisdom and divine guidance. Furthermore, it assures those who excel in goodness of receiving God's mercy. These are the ones who *"attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter."* (Verse 4) Thus it confirms the certainty of the hereafter and the duty of offering worship to God. These are coupled with a clear psychological influence: *"Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful."* (Verse 5)

On the other hand there are those who would pay for idle talk in order to divert others from the path of God, ridiculing these verses. These are faced with a fearsome prospect that suits their ridicule: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) It describes the movements of these people thus: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) This is coupled with a psychological touch showing how contemptible such people are: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) Another touch sends fear into their hearts although this is given mockingly: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) The Arabic term, *bashshirhu,* used for 'giving news' is always employed when people are given good and happy news. Its use here, however, denotes a clear sense of mockery.

The *sūrah* again refers to the believers, giving details of their success, which was already mentioned in general terms. It shows what reward awaits them in the hereafter, just as it has shown the requital of arrogant unbelievers: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9) At this point, the *sūrah* portrays a panoramic scene of the great universe as providing the proof that speaks to human

nature from every aspect, and in every language. It clearly presents this great truth, yet most people remain heedless of it: *"He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs."* (Verse 10) As it presents these aspects of universal evidence which overwhelm people's minds, the *sūrah* shakes those erring hearts that associate partners with God despite seeing His great creation: *"This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error."* (Verse 11) As this touch makes its profound universal note, the first presentation concludes.

The second presentation begins with real people, and tackles the same issue with a new approach to produce further effects: *"We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān."* (Verse 12) What is, then, the nature of this wisdom and what is its distinctive feature? It is summed up in a word: *"Be grateful to God."* (Verse 12) This is true wisdom in action. The second step shows Luqmān as he gives counsel to his son. It is the advice of a sage to his young son, which means that it is free of fault. No one can describe such advice as insincere or dishonest: how could they when it is from father to son? This advice states the major issue of faith which was referred to in the first presentation, as well as the issue of the hereafter, but it employs new influences here: *"Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong."* (Verse 13)

Here we see relations with one's parents in a way that overflows with tenderness and compassion: *"We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents."* (Verse 14) The *sūrah* makes clear the first rule concerning faith, which makes its bond the primary one in human life, taking precedence over that of blood and kinship. Strong and appealing as the latter bond is, it is lower on the scale than the bond of faith: *"Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me."* (Verse 15) It adds here the truth of the life to come: *"In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 15) This is then followed with a very strong psychological factor demonstrating the extent, accuracy and comprehensiveness of God's knowledge. This is done in such a way that makes us shudder as we contemplate it against the background of the great universe: *"My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All Aware."* (Verse 16)

Luqmān continues his admonition to his son, outlining the duties imposed by

faith, including the all-important duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and what follows from both of remaining patient in adversity, as difficulties are bound to be encountered by the advocates of faith: *"Endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve."* (Verse 17) This should be coupled with commitment to good manners. No advocate of faith should ever be arrogant, as such action is bound to spoil his advocacy efforts: *"Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass."* (Verses 1819) Not only does the *sūrah* dismiss such proud, haughty and arrogant behaviour, it looks upon it with contempt. This provides a marked psychological effect.

The third presentation begins with a new factor derived from people's attachment to the heavens and the earth, and the blessings God has placed in them for mankind, even though they do not show any gratitude: *"Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations."* (Verse 20) This new factor shows all argument about God to be abhorrent to an upright nature and sound mind. The *sūrah* denounces the unbelievers' stagnant attitude: *"When it is said to them: 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in."* (Verse 21) This is a stupid attitude betraying total ignorance. The comment that follows also carries a strong psychological component: *"Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire."* (Verse 21)

The question of reward and requital on the Day of Judgement is then shown to be closely connected with the question of belief or denying faith: *"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]."* (Verses 22-23) The *sūrah* then refers to God's absolute knowledge: *"God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 23) A strong element of warning is then added: *"We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering."* (Verse 24)

As this third presentation draws to a close people are made to face up to the logic of human nature as it reflects different aspects of the universe and its inevitable acknowledgement of the One Creator: *"If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand."* (Verse 25) The section then concludes with a scene of the universe, showing God's knowledge as infinite, while His will of creation and origination is unrestricted. These are given as universal evidences in

support of the concept of resurrection and return, as this also proves creation in the first place: *"Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all."* (Verses 27-28)

The fourth presentation begins with a universal scene that produces special effects on people's hearts. It is the scene of the night and the day as each creeps into the other. This scene also shows the sun and the moon as they move in their orbits within certain limits and up to a point in time that is known to no one other than God who created them and who knows them as well as He knows people and their actions: *"Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do?"* (Verse 29) This scene is made to provide human nature with fresh evidence in support of the central issue: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30)

The *sūrah* then touches our hearts with another strongly effective note derived from an aspect of God's grace represented by the ships as they go about the sea: *"Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 31) The comment here shows man's natural attitude as he faces the might of the sea when he is free of the deceptive influence of power and knowledge that keeps him away from his Lord. Such a natural attitude provides evidence for the central theme of God's oneness: *"When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers."* (Verse 32)

While the sea's waves can be fearsome, they provide a reminder of the greatest fear that severs blood relations, a bond which can never be severed in this present life: *"Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you."* (Verse 33) At this point, with man trembling in fear, the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that states the final verdict in all the issues it has treated: *"Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things."* (Verse 34)

These four presentations of the same theme, with their different styles, effects and conclusions constitute an example of how the Qur'ān deals with human hearts. They provide an approach chosen by God who has created these hearts and knows what suits them. In the following pages we will discuss these four presentations in detail, putting two into each of the two following chapters as they manifest stronger interaction in this way.

1
A Sage's Admonition

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, (2)

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, (3)

هُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ لِّلۡمُحۡسِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. (4)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَيُؤۡتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم بِٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ هُمۡ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful. (5)

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدٗى مِّن رَّبِّهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡمُفۡلِحُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. (6)

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَشۡتَرِي لَهۡوَ ٱلۡحَدِيثِ لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖ وَيَتَّخِذَهَا هُزُوًاۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمۡ عَذَابٞ مُّهِينٞ ﴿٦﴾

When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.' (7)

وَإِذَا تُتۡلَىٰ عَلَيۡهِ ءَايَٰتُنَا وَلَّىٰ مُسۡتَكۡبِرٗا كَأَن لَّمۡ يَسۡمَعۡهَا كَأَنَّ فِيٓ أُذُنَيۡهِ وَقۡرٗاۖ

فَبَشِّرۡهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ٧

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ لَهُمۡ جَنَّٰتُ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ٨

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss (8)

خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَاۖ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٗاۚ وَهُوَ ٱلۡعَزِيزُ ٱلۡحَكِيمُ ٩

in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (9)

خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ بِغَيۡرِ عَمَدٖ تَرَوۡنَهَاۖ وَأَلۡقَىٰ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ رَوَٰسِيَ أَن تَمِيدَ بِكُمۡ وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ دَآبَّةٖۚ وَأَنزَلۡنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءٗ فَأَنۢبَتۡنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوۡجٖ كَرِيمٍ ١٠

He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. (10)

هَٰذَا خَلۡقُ ٱللَّهِ فَأَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقَ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن دُونِهِۦۚ بَلِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ فِي ضَلَٰلٖ مُّبِينٖ ١١

This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error. (11)

وَلَقَدۡ ءَاتَيۡنَا لُقۡمَٰنَ ٱلۡحِكۡمَةَ أَنِ ٱشۡكُرۡ لِلَّهِۚ وَمَن يَشۡكُرۡ فَإِنَّمَا يَشۡكُرُ لِنَفۡسِهِۦۖ وَمَن كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٞ ١٢

We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (12)

وَإِذۡ قَالَ لُقۡمَٰنُ لِٱبۡنِهِۦ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُۥ يَٰبُنَيَّ لَا تُشۡرِكۡ بِٱللَّهِۖ إِنَّ ٱلشِّرۡكَ لَظُلۡمٌ عَظِيمٞ ١٣

Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: 'My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.' (13)

وَوَصَّيۡنَا ٱلۡإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيۡهِ حَمَلَتۡهُ أُمُّهُۥ وَهۡنًا عَلَىٰ وَهۡنٖ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ فِي عَامَيۡنِ أَنِ

We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. (14)

ٱشۡكُرۡ لِي وَلِوَٰلِدَيۡكَ إِلَيَّ ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿١٤﴾

وَإِن جَٰهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تُشۡرِكَ بِي مَا لَيۡسَ لَكَ بِهِۦ عِلۡمٞ فَلَا تُطِعۡهُمَاۖ وَصَاحِبۡهُمَا فِي ٱلدُّنۡيَا مَعۡرُوفٗاۖ وَٱتَّبِعۡ سَبِيلَ مَنۡ أَنَابَ إِلَيَّۚ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرۡجِعُكُمۡ فَأُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمۡ تَعۡمَلُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (15)

يَٰبُنَيَّ إِنَّهَآ إِن تَكُ مِثۡقَالَ حَبَّةٖ مِّنۡ خَرۡدَلٖ فَتَكُن فِي صَخۡرَةٍ أَوۡ فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ أَوۡ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ يَأۡتِ بِهَا ٱللَّهُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٞ ﴿١٦﴾

'My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware. (16)

يَٰبُنَيَّ أَقِمِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأۡمُرۡ بِٱلۡمَعۡرُوفِ وَٱنۡهَ عَنِ ٱلۡمُنكَرِ وَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَصَابَكَۖ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ عَزۡمِ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ﴿١٧﴾

My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve. (17)

وَلَا تُصَعِّرۡ خَدَّكَ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَمۡشِ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ مَرَحًاۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخۡتَالٖ فَخُورٖ ﴿١٨﴾

Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. (18)

وَٱقۡصِدۡ فِي مَشۡيِكَ وَٱغۡضُضۡ مِن صَوۡتِكَۚ إِنَّ أَنكَرَ ٱلۡأَصۡوَٰتِ لَصَوۡتُ ٱلۡحَمِيرِ ﴿١٩﴾

Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.' (19)

A Book of Wisdom

> *Alif. Lām. Mīm. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful.* (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters which are then described as *"These are the verses of the divine book, full of wisdom."* (Verse 2) This serves to emphasize that the verses of this book are composed of letters of the same sort. The book is described here as being one of wisdom because wisdom is repeatedly mentioned in this *sūrah.* Hence, it is fitting, in the normal method of the Qur'ān, that this particular aspect of the book is emphasized in this context. Moreover, speaking of the book as one of wisdom gives it connotations of life and will. It is as though the book itself is a living creature which is wise in what it says and the way it directs people to behave. It chooses its objective and serves it. This is indeed true of the book as it has life, spirit, movement and a distinctive personality. Furthermore, it provides friendly companionship, one which is felt by those who live with it and under its shade. They relate to it and have a mutual response with it just like close friends.

This book, which is full of wisdom provides *"guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good."* This is its essential and permanent status: providing guidance so that goodly people can follow the right way. Indeed, travellers who follow its way are never in error. This book also provides people with mercy as they feel reassured and contented by the guidance they are given. They feel God's mercy as they attain success, establish firm bonds and strong mutual commitments among those who follow such guidance, and also between them and the laws of the universe in which they live.

The ones who excel in doing good are those who *"attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter."* (Verse 4) Such people attend regularly to prayers, and offer them in full, on time and in the right manner. This fulfils the purpose of those prayers and enhances their effect on feelings and behaviour. Thus prayer creates a very strong bond with God, one which spreads an air of pleasantness on life as a whole. Giving generously in charity enables the giver to rise above the natural instinct to hold on to things. It helps to establish a social system based on mutual cooperation where both the affluent and the deprived find confidence and reassurance, as well as genuine mutual care. Certainty of the hereafter ensures that believers stay alert, seeking what God will give, and resisting the lure of all worldly comforts and luxuries. Furthermore, it keeps the believer heedful of what God desires, in public and private, in matters small or large. Thus he

aims to achieve excellence in doing good, or *ihsān,* which the Prophet defined as: "To worship God as though you see Him; if you do not see Him, remember that He sees you." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

It is for those who excel in doing good that the divine book is both guidance and mercy. The transparency of their hearts enables them to find comfort and reassurance in this book. They are able to relate to the light that is at the core of its nature and understand its wise objectives. Therefore, they accept it feeling the harmony that it provides with the universe at large and appreciating the clarity of the way they follow. This Qur'ān gives to every heart what suits its openness and sensitivity. Furthermore, it responds to the love, appreciation and high esteem with which hearts approach it. The Qur'ān is indeed alive, reciprocating people's feelings.

Those who attend to prayer, give in charity and are certain of the hereafter *"are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful."* (Verse 5) Whoever accepts divine guidance will be successful. Such a person moves along with enlightenment which leads him to his goal. He is thus free from error in this life and from the consequences of error in the life to come. He has reassurance, comfort, and friendly interaction with all that exists.

The Other Party

On the other side stand a totally different type of people:

> *Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.* (Verses 6-7)

Idle talk is any type of talk that distracts hearts and kills time without yielding any benefit to man or his mission on earth. Let us remind ourselves that man's mission is to build human life on the basis of goodness, justice and righteousness. Islam defines this mission, its nature, limits and means, charting the way it should follow. The Qur'ānic statement here is general describing a type of person that always exists. There are, however, reports that suggest that the Qur'ān is describing a particular incident that took place in the early years of Islam. These reports speak of al-Nađr ibn al-Ĥārith who used to buy books recording the legends and stories of Persian heroes. He made every effort to get people to listen to his narratives instead of listening to the Prophet reciting the Qur'ān. This statement, however, is more general

and wider in scope than this. It describes a type of person with clear characteristics. This type is seen in every generation just as they were evident in Makkah among the first community addressed by the Qur'ān.

"Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk." (Verse 6) Such people would pay money, time and life to buy such idle talk. How high the price, and cheap the commodity in which such people spend their lives. They buy such talk *"so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule."* (Verse 6) They are truly ignorant. Their action is neither based on sound knowledge, nor aims for a wise objective. They have bad intentions and aims. They want to use such idle talk to lead themselves and others astray from God's path. They are ill-mannered, ridicule God's path, and mock the way God has laid down for people's lives. Hence, the Qur'ān issues a strong warning to such people. It shows them as contemptible, even before it completes their picture: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) The description of their suffering as shameful is deliberate for this replies to their mocking of the divine way of life.

Painting the image of this other party is then resumed: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) The image here is full of movement, showing this person as arrogant, turning away in pride. He is, therefore, decorated with shame and this makes us look at him with contempt: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) It is this heaviness that stops him from listening to God's verses. No person listens to these divine verses and then turns away so arrogantly. This description is completed with further ridicule: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) As explained in the Prologue, the verse uses here the term *bashshir,* which connotes the giving of happy news. Its usage adds further ridicule.

By way of contrast, the *sūrah* speaks of the reward to be given to the good believers who act on the basis of their faith. It also provides some details of their success to which earlier reference was made: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9)

Whenever the Qur'ān mentions reward, it precedes this by mentioning faith and good action. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that it must never remain an idle belief that triggers no action. It must always be a living, active reality. Indeed, Islam hardly settles in a person's heart before it begins to establish itself in action and behaviour. It reflects its nature and what it does to believers' consciences through its clear effects on people's lives.

Those believers who have translated their faith into good action *"shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide."* (Verse 9) Their admission to heaven and their abode there

simply fulfils God's true promise. The grace God bestows on His servants means that He commits Himself to reward them generously for what they do for themselves, not for Him, as He is in no need of anyone. *"He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 9) He is certainly able to fulfil His promise, and He is wise in all that He does, including creation, promise and fulfilment.

Signs of Wisdom

The ultimate proof of God's might, wisdom and all other issues mentioned in the *sūrah* is the great universe, whose creation no human being ever claims for himself or for anyone other than God. The universe is huge and awesome, reflecting harmony and coherence. It has a fine and elaborate system. It captivates our hearts and readily faces human nature in such a way that it cannot turn away from it. Hence, it readily acknowledges the great Creator's oneness and declares anyone who associates partners with Him as erring, as those who transgress the bounds of clear truth:

> *He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error.* (Verses 10-11)

If we take the term 'skies' at its apparent meaning, without going into complex scientific research, we see how awesome, expansive and sublime they are. 'Whether the reference here is to planets, stars, galaxies or other celestial bodies that move in the space whose nature and extent are known only to God, or to this blue dome which we see with our eyes but no one knows what exactly it is, the fact remains that there are huge, majestic bodies that are elevated without supporting pillars. People see them with their eyes, wherever they look during the night or day and wherever they travel on earth. To contemplate the sky with our naked eyes, even though we cannot comprehend its great dimensions, is sufficient to send a shudder through our whole beings. We see a great, endless expanse without limits, but we also see a fine and beautiful system that holds all these creatures in such perfect harmony. Neither our eyes nor our hearts ever tire of contemplating such majesty. Indeed, this beauty is so captivating that all our feelings are absorbed. What does man say when he realizes that each little dot of light moving in this great expanse may be millions of times bigger than the earth he lives on?

This reference to the limitless space, *"He has created the skies without any supports that you can see," is* made quickly and briefly, before we are returned straight to earth which is no more than a tiny particle when compared to the great universal expanse.

Yet man sees the earth as huge indeed: no man can traverse it all, even though he spends his life in continuous travel. Thus, the *sūrah* returns us to earth so we contemplate it with open minds, and without the effects of familiarity that cloud our vision: *"and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you."* (Verse 10)

Geologists say that mountains are undulations of the face of the earth resulting from underground pockets of coolness where gases get frozen and reduce in size. Thus the surface of the earth shrinks and becomes wrinkled allowing elevations and falls to take place in proportion to underground reductions in size. This may or may not be true, but God's book clearly states that these mountains stabilize the earth so that it does not sway. Thus, the rise of a mountain in one place balances shrinkage in another. However, God's word remains supreme. He is indeed the One who always states the truth.

God *"has scattered through it all manner of living creatures."* (Verse 10) This is one of the great wonders of existence. Up to the present day, no one can claim to have fathomed the secret of the presence of life on earth. This applies to life in its simplest, one-cell form. How then can we fathom the greater secret that causes life to become more varied and complex, giving rise to countless species, types and kinds of creatures? Yet most people choose to pass by such great wonders with their eyes and minds closed, just as they pass by something very ordinary that does not deserve a second look. These very people stand amazed as they look at a man-made machine which is very simple when compared to a single living cell and its accurately regulated behaviour. We need not compare such machines to more sophisticated living creatures, let alone to the human body which contains hundreds of chemical laboratories, storehouses, distribution centres, wireless stations that receive and transmit messages, as well as hundreds of other complicated functions, the secrets of which are known only to God.

"We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs." (Verse 10) Sending rain down from the sky is yet another universal wonder which we take for granted, oblivious to what is involved. The water that runs in rivers, fills up lakes, or bursts out in springs comes from the sky according to a carefully planned system that, in turn, is linked to the regulation of the heavens and the earth, their relative distances, natures and formations. The growing of plants after rain has fallen is another wonder that remains infinitely amazing. It reflects several miracles, including those of the springing up of life, its diversity, and the hereditary genes within a small seed allowing replication of all types of flora. To study the colour diversity in one flower of a single plant leads an open heart to reflection on life and its profound secrets, and hence to genuine belief in God, the Originator of life.

The *sūrah* makes clear that God has caused plants to grow in pairs, which is a fascinating fact that scientific research has only recently discovered. All plants have male and female cells which may combine within the same flower, or in two flowers in the same little branch, or in two branches or trees. No fruit can be produced unless pollination takes place between the two types, just as happens in animal and human life.

That these plants and their pairs are described as *'goodly'* imparts a significant feeling, making it suited as God's creation. Hence, it is raised in front of our eyes: *"This is all God's creation."* (Verse 11) And a challenge follows: *"Show me, then, what others might have created."* (Verse 11) Then follows the comment: *"Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error."* (Verse 11) What could be worse than wrongdoing and the error of associating partners with God when looking at God's great and universal creation? With this profound note the first presentation concludes.

A Totally New Approach

The second presentation starts with a new construction, using narration and indirect advice. It takes up the question of gratitude to God alone, believing in His absolute oneness, and the question of the hereafter, reward and requital.

> *We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised.* (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* chooses Luqmān as its spokesman on the questions of God's oneness and the life to come. Reports on Luqmān's identity vary, with some suggesting that he was a prophet, while others say that he was a devout person, but not a prophet. The majority of scholars prefer this second view. It is also suggested that he was an Abyssinian slave, while some reports say that he was from Nubia, the area stretching today from southern Egypt to northern Sudan. It is also said that he was one of the Children of Israel and that he was a judge. Whoever Luqmān truly was, the Qur'ān states that he was a man endowed with wisdom, embodied in gratitude to God: *"We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God.'"* (Verse 12) The verse thus contains an implicit directive to show gratitude to God, emulating this sage who is chosen as an example to be followed. This is coupled with another directive making it clear that being grateful to God is of benefit only to the person expressing such gratitude, while it is of no benefit to God, who is ever praised even though none of His creatures offers any such praise: *"He who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised."* (Verse 12) Thus, the person who abandons wisdom and who does not keep something for his future life

betrays the worst type of stupidity.

The question of God's oneness is then raised in the form of an admonition by Luqmān to his son: *"Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong."* (Verse 13) This is a sincere piece of advice, for no parent wishes anything but good for his child. The sage, Luqmān, warns his son against associating partners with God, explaining that to do so is to be guilty of great wrongdoing. He emphasizes this fact twice: firstly, by explaining the reason, and secondly through the emphatic style employed. This is the truth that Muhammad presented to his people, but they argued and disputed with him, suspecting his motives and fearing that he might want to take power and place himself above them. What would they, then, say when they heard Luqmān, the sage, urging it upon his son? A father's counsel is honest, sincere, free of suspicion. The fact is that God's oneness is the old truth stated by everyone to whom God has imparted knowledge and wisdom. It aims to bring pure goodness and nothing else. This is the psychological effect intended here.

Relations with Parents

Continuing on from this parental advice, the *sūrah* speaks in gentle terms about relations between parents and children, delivering this in an inspiring and tender way. Nevertheless, the bond of faith takes precedence over such close relations:

> *We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life].* (Verses 14-15)

That children are enjoined to be good to parents is mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'ān and by the Prophet. The reverse recommendation enjoining kindness to children occurs only rarely, but mostly in connection with infanticide, a special case with special circumstances. Human nature ensures that a newborn is taken care of by its parents. It is because of their very nature that people look after the new generation in order to ensure the continuity of life, as God wills. In this way, parents normally offer their personal efforts, resources, possessions and lives generally, without complaint or boredom. Indeed they often do not realize how much they give. They do it willingly and with pleasure, as if they were the recipients. Thus, parents do not

need to be urged to take care of their children. It is children who need to be urged to look after the generation that has already given its all and stands at life's departure gate. Children can compensate parents for even a portion of what they have given, even though they may dedicate their entire lives to such ends. Such parental dedication is given an inspiring image: *"His mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years."* (Verse 14) Needless to say, the mother gives the larger share of such sacrifice, with more love and care. "A man was carrying his mother on his back in ṭawāf, [a worship ritual of pilgrimage], when he asked the Prophet: 'Do I thus pay her back for what she did for me?' The Prophet said: 'No; not even for one heaved sigh." [Related by al-Bazzār.] This is how the Prophet compares the two actions. The man could not repay his mother for even one heaved sigh during pregnancy or childbirth, for she carried her child in weakness upon weakness.

With this image of compassion the *sūrah* directs people to the need to express gratitude to God, the first Benefactor, and then to show gratitude to parents who are always ready to give to their children. These duties are given in order of priority: *'Be grateful to Me and to your parents."* (Verse 14) This fact is linked to the reality of the hereafter: *"With Me is the end of all journeys."* (Verse 14) It is then, at the end of the journey, that what has been advanced of good work will be of benefit.

This bond between parent and child, with all its care, love and sacrifice, nevertheless comes second to the bond of faith. Hence, immediately after the statement enjoining man to be dutiful to parents, he is told: *"Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* (Verse 15) Should this happen, the duty of obeying one's parents is no longer valid. The bond of faith supersedes all bonds. Hence, no matter how hard parents try to persuade, coerce, pressurize or force their son or daughter to associate with God anyone whose godship is unknown to them — and no being other than God has any godship to be known — they must not be obeyed. This is an order from God whom all creatures must obey.

However, differences of faith and the order not to obey parents against one's faith does not deprive parents of their right to receive kindly and caring treatment and companionship: *"but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness."* (Verse 15) This life is, after all, a short journey that does not affect the truth: *"Follow the path of those who turn towards Me,"* i.e. the believers. *"In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return,"* after this short journey on earth; *'when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 15) Everyone will have the just reward of their deeds.

It is reported that this verse and the two similar to it in *Sūrah* 29, The Spider, and *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, were revealed in connection with Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāş and his mother [as reported earlier]. The story is mentioned in Muslim's *Şaĥīĥ?,*

which is universally recognized as an authentic *Ĥadīth* anthology. However, its import is general and applies to any similar situation. It draws an order for bonds and relations, and one for duties. Thus, the bond of faith in God ranks top, and with it the requirement to fulfil His orders. The Qur'ān emphasizes this rule on every occasion and in a variety of forms so that it is solidly implanted in a believer's consciousness. There can be no confusion or ambiguity about this.

The Hereafter and the Reckoning

The next paragraph in Luqmān's admonition speaks about the hereafter and its accurate reckoning of people's deeds and its just reward. This reality is not, however, presented as bare facts. It is shown against the panoramic scene of the universe, in an image that makes the human conscience tremble as it reflects on God's detailed and perfect knowledge:

> *My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware.* (Verse 16)

No abstract presentation of God's knowledge and its comprehensiveness, His power, accuracy of reckoning and fairness of weighing can match this clear and vivid image. This is the distinction of the unique Qur'ānic method, beautifully effected, profoundly effective. A grain of mustard seed, without weight or value, misplaced deep in a rock where it cannot be seen or found! Or it could be '*in the skies*', in that vast, endless structure where a huge star appears no more than a little dot or a floating particle! Or it could be '*in the earth*' lost in its sand and dust with nothing to indicate it. Nevertheless, *'God will bring it forth.'* (Verse 16) His knowledge traces it and His power does not let go of it. *"God is Gracious, All-Aware."* (Verse 16) A fitting comment on the magnificent scene!

Our imagination continues to follow that mustard seed in those deep and vast areas so we reflect on God's knowledge which never loses sight of it. Thus, our hearts are filled with awe and we turn to God appreciating His knowledge of all that is beyond the realm of our perception. Thus, the truth the Qur'ān wants to drive home is established in our minds.

The *sūrah* continues with Luqmān as he goes on admonishing his son. Having established the faith in man's conscience and clarified its main essentials, he now speaks about attending to prayer, advocacy of the faith and perseverance in the face of inevitable difficulties:

> *My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve.* (Verse 17)

Such is the way of faith: declaring God's oneness, knowing that He sees all, aspiration to His reward, trust in His justice and fear of His punishment. This is followed by a call to people to maintain the right path, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. Prior to all this, however, we should ensure that we have the right equipment for the battle against evil: we should worship God alone, address prayers to Him, and remain steadfast despite adversity. Adversity can take many forms from deviation to stubbornness, turning away as well as verbal and physical abuse, loss of property and wealth, as also physical hardship: *"These are matters that require strong resolve."* Such strong resolve allows no hesitation after a decision has been firmly taken.

Luqmān goes on to speak about the manners that should be characteristic of advocates who call on people to adopt the divine faith. Such advocacy of what is good does not permit behaving arrogantly towards people under the pretext of leading them to what is of benefit. Needless to say, arrogant behaviour that is not accompanied by the advocacy of goodness is even worse and more abominable:

> *Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.* (Verses 18-19)

In drawing this image of arrogance the *sūrah* uses the Arabic term *tuṣa'ir* which is translated here as '*turn your cheek away*'. This term is derived from the disease *ṣa'ar* which affects camels causing them to involuntarily turn their necks sideways. The *sūrah* chooses this term in order to describe the repugnance of turning one's cheek away from people in a gesture similar to what camels affected by this disease do. Walking haughtily is another type of behaviour suggesting carelessness about people and their feelings. This is again a gesture that is disliked by God and man. It is a sign of a sick mind and a self-centred person: *"God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful."* (Verse 18)

The order not to walk haughtily on earth is coupled with a statement about the proper way of walking: *"Be of modest bearing in your walk."* (Verse 19) Such modesty is expressed in Arabic with the word *iqṣid,* which connotes economy and definite purpose. The economy aspect referred to here is the need not to waste energy in a boastful, arrogant gait, and the purposeful walk is one which does not waste time;

rather it moves towards its goal easily.

Luqmān's admonition also urges his son to lower his voice, which is a mark of politeness, self-confidence and reliability. Only an impolite person, or one who has self doubt or uncertainty about what he says, resorts to speaking loudly as he tries to disguise such doubts by raising his voice. The *sūrah* shows this behaviour as disgusting, adding to its abhorrence with the comment: *"Lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass."* (Verse 19)

2
God’s Absolute Knowledge

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations. (20)

أَلَمۡ تَرَوۡاْ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي
ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَأَسۡبَغَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ
نِعَمَهُۥ ظَٰهِرَةٗ وَبَاطِنَةٗۗ وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن
يُجَٰدِلُ فِي ٱللَّهِ بِغَيۡرِ عِلۡمٖ وَلَا هُدٗى وَلَا
كِتَٰبٖ مُّنِيرٖ ٢٠

When it is said to them, ‘Follow what God has revealed’, they say, ‘No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.’ Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire. (21)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ ٱتَّبِعُواْ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُواْ
بَلۡ نَتَّبِعُ مَا وَجَدۡنَا عَلَيۡهِ ءَابَآءَنَآۚ أَوَلَوۡ
كَانَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنُ يَدۡعُوهُمۡ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ
ٱلسَّعِيرِ ٢١

Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (22)

۞ وَمَن يُسۡلِمۡ وَجۡهَهُۥٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحۡسِنٞ
فَقَدِ ٱسۡتَمۡسَكَ بِٱلۡعُرۡوَةِ ٱلۡوُثۡقَىٰۗ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ
عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلۡأُمُورِ ٢٢

وَمَن كَفَرَ فَلَا يَحْزُنكَ كُفْرُهُۥٓ ۚ إِلَيْنَا
مَرْجِعُهُمْ فَنُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا عَمِلُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌۢ
بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٣﴾

And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (23)

نُمَتِّعُهُمْ قَلِيلًا ثُمَّ نَضْطَرُّهُمْ إِلَىٰ عَذَابٍ
غَلِيظٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering. (24)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ
وَٱلْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۚ بَلْ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. (25)

لِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ
ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٦﴾

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self- sufficient, worthy of all praise. (26)

وَلَوْ أَنَّمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ مِن شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَٰمٌ
وَٱلْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُۥ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَّا
نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ
﴿٢٧﴾

Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. (27)

مَّا خَلْقُكُمْ وَلَا بَعْثُكُمْ إِلَّا كَنَفْسٍ
وَٰحِدَةٍ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَمِيعٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all. (28)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُولِجُ ٱلَّيْلَ فِى ٱلنَّهَارِ
وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِى ٱلَّيْلِ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمْسَ
وَٱلْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِىٓ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى
وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? (29)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدْعُونَ
مِن دُونِهِ ٱلْبَٰطِلُ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلْعَلِىُّ
ٱلْكَبِيرُ ﴿٣٠﴾

Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great. (30)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ ٱلْفُلْكَ تَجْرِى فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ
بِنِعْمَتِ ٱللَّهِ لِيُرِيَكُم مِّنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى
ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣١﴾

Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. (31)

وَإِذَا غَشِيَهُم مَّوْجٌ كَٱلظُّلَلِ دَعَوُا۟ ٱللَّهَ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّىٰهُمْ إِلَى ٱلْبَرِّ
فَمِنْهُم مُّقْتَصِدٌ ۚ وَمَا يَجْحَدُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَّا
كُلُّ خَتَّارٍ كَفُورٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers. (32)

Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (33)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمۡ وَٱخۡشَوۡاْ يَوۡمٗا
لَّا يَجۡزِي وَالِدٌ عَن وَلَدِهِۦ وَلَا مَوۡلُودٌ
هُوَ جَازٍ عَن وَالِدِهِۦ شَيۡـًٔاۚ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ
ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞۖ فَلَا تَغُرَّنَّكُمُ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنۡيَا
وَلَا يَغُرَّنَّكُم بِٱللَّهِ ٱلۡغَرُورُ ٣٣

Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things. (34)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عِندَهُۥ عِلۡمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَيُنَزِّلُ
ٱلۡغَيۡثَ وَيَعۡلَمُ مَا فِي ٱلۡأَرۡحَامِۖ وَمَا تَدۡرِي
نَفۡسٞ مَّاذَا تَكۡسِبُ غَدٗاۖ وَمَا تَدۡرِي
نَفۡسُۢ بِأَيِّ أَرۡضٖ تَمُوتُۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ
خَبِيرُۢ ٣٤

Blessings Galore

The third presentation of this central issue of faith employs a different style, showing us in the first place the universal proof as it relates to human life, interests and livelihood. It speaks of God's blessings, visible and subtle, which people enjoy. Nevertheless, they continue to engage in arguments about God, who gives them all these blessings. The *sūrah* then follows the same pattern in presenting the central theme of faith as already discussed in the first two presentations:

> *Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light giving revelations. When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire.* (Verses 20-21)

This remark occurs repeatedly in the Qur'ān. Conveyed in different ways, it appears new every time, because the universe appears new whenever we contemplate its secrets and reflect on its unending wonders. Indeed, it takes far longer than man's lifetime to review these wonders. Yet every time he looks at them, they appear to have a different colour and a different tone.

The *sūrah* portrays these from the viewpoint of harmony between man's needs in his life on earth and the construction of the universe. This leaves no possibility for such harmony to have been achieved by mere coincidence. It is inevitable, therefore, that we should acknowledge the single will that makes such harmony a reality.

Planet earth is no more than a little particle when compared to the universe. Compared to the size of the earth, man is a tiny and weak creature. Moreover, the earth contains forces as well as animate and inanimate beings in comparison to which man appears no more than a tiny creature in size, weight and strength. By His grace, however, and by breathing into him of His own spirit and honouring him above many of His creatures, God has given man a special position in the universal system. Indeed, He has given him the ability to use many of the forces and resources of this universe. This is what the *sūrah* describes as 'making things subservient' to man within the context of granting him countless blessings that are subtle and apparent, inward and outward. These blessings go beyond making things in the heavens and earth subservient to man. Mere human existence is a blessing, as are man's powers, abilities, talents and skills. Sending human messengers with divine messages is an even bigger and greater blessing. The breathing of God's spirit into man at the time of his creation is also an aspect of blessing. Indeed, every breath man draws, every heart beat, every sigh, sound, feeling and thought is a blessing which he could not have had without God's grace.

God has made what is in the skies available and subservient to man. Thus, he is able to benefit from the sun's rays, the moon's light, the guidance provided by the stars, rain, air and birds that fly. He also enabled him to benefit and use what is on and in the earth. This is even easier to note and reflect upon. Man is placed in charge of this vast kingdom, and given the ability to use all the resources of the earth, some of which are clear and apparent while others are subtle and hidden; some are known fully to man, some he knows only by their effects, and some he benefits from without even knowing what they are. In every moment of the night and day man is given the great abundance of God's blessings, the extent and form of which he does not fully know. Yet in spite of all this, some people are ingrate, do not reflect on the world around them and do not appreciate the blessings they enjoy: *"Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations."* (Verse 20)

This argument sounds singular in the light of this universal proof. Considering

that God's grace is so great and abundant, man's denial looks both absurd and ugly. Both human nature and conscience find it repugnant. The type of person who argues about the truth of God, and what this means, is deviant, unresponsive to the inspiration the universe shines with, denies God's grace, and unashamedly argues about the One who has granted all these blessings. What is worse is that in their argument, such people do not rely on any true knowledge, have no proper guidance, and refer to no guiding revelation.

"When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.'" (Verse 21) This is their only basis and evidence! It is nothing other than blindly following traditions which lack knowledge and intelligent thinking. Islam wants to free them from such blind imitation, so as to set their minds free. It wants them to be able to think, reflect and benefit by the light, but they adamantly hold on to the chains of their deviant past.

Islam means freedom of conscience, active feelings, aspiration for enlightenment and a new way of life that is free of blind tradition. Yet such people turn their backs on it, rejecting its light and guidance. They argue about God without knowledge or guidance. Hence, the *sūrah* looks upon them with ridicule, making a subtle reference to the end such attitudes lead to: *"Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire."* (Verse 21) Indeed their attitude is nothing less than an invitation by Satan leading them to God's punishment. Will they persist with this despite the end which they will be certain to have? This last remark should at least alert them to the difficulty of their position.

The *sūrah* then refers to the proper attitude that should result from reflecting on the universal evidence and God's countless blessings: *"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) Together with good deeds, what is required is total submission to God. One should feel reassured of God's will, obey His commands, fulfil the duties He requires, have confidence in His mercy, trust His care, and so enjoy total contentment. All this is grouped under the heading of submission to God.

"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support." This support is a bond that is never severed or weakened. It never lets down anyone who holds to it, whether in situations of ease or difficulty. No one who holds to it will ever be lost, even though his road is rough, dark and beset by hardships. This firm support is the close, confident link between the submitting believer and his Lord. Thus, whatever comes through God's will is accepted without qualm. It gives the believer the sort of reassurance that keeps him calm and confident as he faces all events. Furthermore, in this way, he is able to rise above comforts, luxuries, difficulties, surprises and all other impediments.

Man's journey is long, hard and full of danger. The danger posed by luxury and affluence is no less than that arising from misery and deprivation. Hence the need for firm and ever-present support. The firmest support is that which comes about from submitting oneself to God and doing good deeds. *"With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) With Him all journeys end, and to Him we all return. Hence, it is better for man to submit to Him from the start, so that he moves along his journey with confidence, reassurance and guidance.

> *And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering.* (Verses 23-24)

This is, by contrast, the end of the unbeliever who is deceived by life's comforts. In this present life, he is shown to the Prophet and the believers as being of no consequence: *"Whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you."* (Verse 23) He is too small for you to grieve over. As for his end in the life to come, it is again of no insignificance. He cannot escape God's punishment, when God knows all his actions and intentions: *"To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing in life. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 23) The enjoyments that deceive such people are small, short in duration, trifling in value, but the results at the end are terrifying. These they cannot escape: *"We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering."* (Verse 24) The Arabic term, *ghalīż,* used here to describe the suffering, has more physical connotations than 'severe' suggests. Thus the verse imparts a more tangible feeling of the suffering into which they are driven, unable to avoid it. How vastly different the two ends are.

Using the Creation Argument

In its contemplation of the universe, the *sūrah* puts the unbelievers face to face with the logic of their own nature. In this way, they cannot deny the truth it emphasizes. Yet still there are those who deviate and remain heedless:

> *If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.* (Verses 25-26)

When man questions his own nature and conscience, he cannot avoid admitting this clear truth. The heavens and the earth stand as they are: with careful planning of

their sizes, movements, dimensions, qualities and characteristics. They are made in deliberate measure and full harmony. Yet they are creatures that no one claims to have created, and no one alleges that any creator other than God has had a share in their making. They cannot have come into existence by themselves. Nor can they follow a system or establish harmony without elaborate planning or a planner. To suggest that they have existed by themselves, or as the result of coincidence, does not merit argument. Moreover, human nature profoundly rejects any such claim.

Those who associated partners with God, and argued very strongly against the Prophet and his message, could not falsify the argument of their own nature when they were confronted with the universal proof of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Hence, they did not hesitate in their reply to the question: 'Who has created the heavens and the earth?' Their answer was clear: 'God.' Therefore, God directs His Messenger to comment on their answer thus: *"Say: All praise is due to God alone."* (Verse 25) Praise is due to God for keeping the truth of the universe and its creation clear in human nature. The argument is discontinued so as to give a new comment: *"Yet most of them do not understand."* (Verse 25) It is because they do not understand that they continue to argue, ignoring the logic of human nature and the fact that the whole universe points to its supreme Creator.

The *sūrah* adds a statement of God's ownership of all that is in the heavens and the earth, whether it is made available to man or not. He is in no need of anything in the heavens or the earth. He is praised even though people may not praise Him: *"To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise."* (Verse 26)

This presentation concludes with a scene of the universe which symbolizes God's inexhaustible riches, and unlimited knowledge. It further expresses His supreme and ever-renewing ability to create and His unrestricted will:

> *Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all.* (Verses 27-28)

This scene is taken straight from people's limited knowledge and observations, but aims to put before them the meaning of God's ever- renewing will which is neither limited nor restrained. Their minds cannot visualize this concept without such a comparison. People record their knowledge and speeches, and sign their orders, using pens, which used to be made of reed, and ink which hardly filled an inkpot or a bottle. The comparison drawn here shows them that if all the trees on earth were made into pens, and all the seas were made into ink this would still be

insufficient to describe God's inexhaustible might. Furthermore, even if this sea of ink was given supplies with seven more seas, while scribes sat to record God's words that speak of His knowledge and will, it would still be insufficient. All the pens, ink, trees and seas will be used up and exhausted, while God's words will not end. It is a case where what is finite is faced with the infinite. No matter how huge the finite is, it will come to an end, while the infinite remains undiminished. God's words will not finish, not ever, because His knowledge is unlimited and His will unrestricted.

Trees, seas, living creatures, objects, and situations all come to an end. The human heart stands in awe before God's majesty, which is endless, unchanging: *"God is indeed Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 27)

Then comes the final note in this section, using the previous image as evidence confirming the ease with which God creates and the simplicity with which He brings the dead back to life: *"The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28) The will that creates simply by willing the creation to take place does not see any difference between creating one or many. This will does not exert any measurable effort in creating an individual, and such an effort is not repeated with the creation of every individual. Hence, creating one and creating millions are exactly the same. Likewise is their resurrection. It is only the word, or the will: *"When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, 'Be', and it is."* (36: 82) With the knowledge that accompanies creation and resurrection come the reckoning and fair reward: *"God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28)

God the Truth

The fourth presentation tackles the same issue addressed in the previous three, stating that God is the truth while all those they invoke beside Him are false. It speaks of addressing worship purely to God alone and of the Day of Judgement when neither parent nor child can avail the other. Several psychological influences are brought to bear here against a universal background:

> *Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great.* (Verses 29-30)

The scenes of the night passing into the day and the day passing into the night, as well as their shortening and increase in length with the different seasons are indeed

remarkable. However, our long familiarity with them makes most of us oblivious to this wonder that occurs regularly, without fail or disturbance. It follows a regular cycle that never deviates from its set pattern. It is only God who can initiate such a system and maintain it. To appreciate this fact needs no more than observation of this unfailing cycle.

The relation of this cycle to the sun, the moon, their regular movements and their being made subservient is an even greater wonder than the day and night, their shortening and increase in length. No one could do this other than God Almighty. It is He who knows and determines how long they will continue to follow this cycle, until the time He has appointed. Another truism is added to these two universal facts in the same verse: *"God is fully aware of all that you do."* (Verse 29) Thus, the three are cited together as closely-linked, indisputable facts. This is followed by a comment stating the great truth upon which all facts are based. It is the central theme of this *sūrah,* which is preambled by this evidence: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30)

This accurate, balanced, coherent and unfailing universal system functions by the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth and that whatever else people may invoke is false. This is the great truth upon which is based every other truth, and by which the whole universe fulfils its existence. That God — limitless is He in His glory — is the Ultimate Truth means that it is He who brings the universe into existence, maintains it, conducts its affairs, guarantees its stability and coherence for the length of time He chooses.

"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth." (Verse 30) Everything else changes and alters, increases and decreases, is subject to strengthening and weakening, flourishing and withering. Everything else comes into existence and goes out of it, but God alone is Eternal, unchanging, subject to no transformation or alteration.

Yet there remains in my mind something I have not expressed about the statement: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth."* It is something that cannot be communicated in words; something which is not in my power to express; something I feel strongly in my heart, yet human language cannot put into words. The same is true of the last statement in this verse: *"God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30) Indeed, no one else is high or great. Have I said anything about what works inside me about this Qur'ānic statement? I feel that any human expression of these sublime truths detracts from them. Indeed, the Qur'ānic expression is uniquely inspiring.

The *sūrah* follows this great universal scene and the inspiring statement that

follows it by drawing a familiar image in human life. It paints a picture of ships sailing across the sea by God's grace. It puts the unbelievers face to face with human nature when it encounters the dangers of the sea, when no power or arrogance is of any use:

> *Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them falter [between faith and unbelief*. *Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers.* (Verses 31-32)

Ships sail through water in accordance with the laws of nature God applies to the sea, wind, the earth and the skies. Since He has created all these and given them their respective qualities, He thus enables the ships to sail through the sea without sinking to the bottom or standing still. Should these qualities be disturbed in any way, the ships will not be able to traverse the waters. If disturbance occurs in the density of seawater, or the substances from which the ships are made, or air pressure at water surface, or the water currents, or the wind, or if the temperature goes beyond the level that keeps water in its present form and maintains the water currents and winds at suitable levels, ships would not be able to so sail the seas. But beyond all this, it is God who keeps ships floating on the surface, protecting them against strong waves, tempests and severe weather conditions. None other than God can keep them afloat. They move by God's grace and blessing, carrying some aspects of God's grace and His blessings. The Qur'ānic statement includes both meanings.

"So that He might show you some of His signs." These are obvious, available for all to see and contemplate. Anyone can see them. There is no ambiguity or confusion about them. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 31) These are two conditions that are frequently experienced in life.

People however are neither patient nor grateful. When harm afflicts them, they raise their voices with prayer. When God lifts harm from them, only a few are truly grateful. *"When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone."* (Verse 32) In the face of such danger, with the waves engulfing them from all sides, and their ships rocking in the angry sea, hearts and souls shed their assumed and delusive power which, in times of ease and comfort, might shield their true nature, severing its links with its Creator. Yet when all masks are torn and human nature emerges from behind its blinding covers, it acknowledges its Lord and

turns to Him in true submission. It abandons all alleged partners, declaring them false. At such moments of danger, people call to God in earnest, with sincere faith in Him and His oneness.

But *"as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude."* (Verse 32) Security and comfort do not drive them back to carelessness. They remain mindful of God's bounty and give thanks for it, but they do not do enough to fulfil their duties towards God in thanksgiving. In other words, they are restrained in their thanks.

There are others who deny God's signs once danger is over and security is again felt. *"Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers."* (Verse 32) Both treachery and unbelief are here described in superlative terms that are nevertheless true of anyone who disbelieves after having seen all the universal indications and listened to the clear arguments about human nature.

The Lure of Comfortable Living

Drawing on the great danger presented by a stormy sea and how it puts things into perspective, the *sūrah* then reminds them of an even greater danger, in comparison with which the danger of the sea appears ever so small. This is the danger of the day when all relations are severed, parents and children are separated and preoccupied with their own positions; when each soul stands on its own, without support, unable to call upon anyone for help:

> *Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you.* (Verse 33)

The horror described here is psychological, measured by its effect on hearts and souls. Nothing severs blood relations and ties between parent and child, and nothing makes everyone preoccupied solely with their own positions unless it be a fear totally unknown to people. The call to fear God, therefore, comes here at the right time, when people are ready to respond. The issue of the hereafter is presented against the background of such great horror so that hearts will listen.

"God's promise is most certainly true." (Verse 33) It will never fail. There can be no avoidance of this very difficult situation. No one can escape the accurate reckoning and the fair reward, when none can avail another of anything.

"Let not, then, the life of this world delude you." (Verse 33) It is full of lure, luxury and comfort, but it is limited in duration, and it is only a test to determine the eventual reward. *"And let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you."* (Verse 33) Let no comfort, work, or interest delude you. Above all, let no devil tempt you, for there are many devils, such as money, science, life, power, authority, desire, fancy and passion. Each has its own lure and temptation which can be very deluding. Fear of God and remembrance of the Day of Judgement, however, should be enough to protect believers from all such temptations.

Knowledge Absolute

At the end of this fourth presentation, which completes the *sūrah,* a final note is given, one which is both powerful and awesome. It describes God's perfect and comprehensive knowledge contrasting this with our own limited, human knowledge. It states the question discussed throughout the *sūrah,* in its four sections, and presents all this in one of the most wonderful images drawn in the Qur'ān:

> *Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things.* (Verse 34)

God Almighty has chosen to keep the knowledge of the Last Hour to Himself; none knows it other than Him. Thus people will always remain cautious, expecting its arrival at any time, trying to be ready for it. They know that there is no time to lose in preparing for its arrival.

It is God who sends down rain in accordance with His wisdom, and in the measure He chooses. People may know by experience and measurement that rain is due, but they cannot create the conditions that bring rain about. The Qur'ānic statement makes clear that it is God who sends down the rain, as it is He who initiates the universal conditions that form and regulate it. Thus, what is exclusive to God in this respect is the ability to send down the rain, as is made clear in the text. Scholars who have included rain among matters that belong exclusively to God's knowledge are mistaken. Yet God's knowledge is true, complete, comprehensive and permanent in all matters. It is not liable to increase or decrease.

"He knows what the wombs contain." (Verse 34) This is exclusive knowledge similar to that of the Last Hour. It is God alone who knows, with absolute certainty, what wombs contain at every moment and in every stage, how they swell or shrink, what type of foetus, even when it has no shape, form or size. He knows whether it is a

male or a female, even at the moment when no one can have any knowledge of this, at the time when the female egg is fertilized. He further knows the features the foetus will have, its characteristics and future abilities. All this is part of God's exclusive knowledge.

"Whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow." (Verse 34) No one knows what will happen to them tomorrow: good or bad, benefit or harm, ease or hardship, health or sickness, obedience to God or disobedience. 'Earning' is far more general than material gain. It applies to everything that happens to a person tomorrow, which is kept hidden under thick covers. People may try to discover this, but they will always fail, remaining unable to discern anything beyond those covers.

Similarly, *"No one knows in what land they will die."* (Verse 34) Such knowledge is kept behind thick blinds which cannot be penetrated by hearing or seeing.

As human beings we stand before these covers acknowledging our weakness and limited knowledge. Thus, the arrogance of assumed, penetrative knowledge is thus seen for what it is. We realize that, compared with what is withheld from us, our knowledge is indeed limited. Even when human knowledge achieves all that it can, there remains a great deal about which we do not know. We will always remain blind to what happens tomorrow, or even in the next moment. With such realization, humans should reduce their arrogance and submit to God.

The *sūrah* presents these highly effective notes against an expansive backdrop of time and place, the present, the near future, the great realm that lies beyond our perceptions, our thoughts and imaginations. This background includes the Last Hour that seems so distant, rain which originates far away, wombs and their hidden contents, what is earned tomorrow which is close in time yet remains unknown, and our place of death and burial which is driven away in our thoughts. Although the background is expansive, the Qur'ānic style gathers it from its broad perspective so that it comes close and points to God's hidden knowledge. Thus we stand as though we try to look through a peephole, but find it blocked. Should even a tiny opening be made in it, what is behind is in the same position as what is before it. It remains closed to man because it is beyond human ability and knowledge. It continues to belong exclusively to God. None knows anything about it except by His permission and according to the measure He determines. *"God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things."* (Verse 34)

Thus the *sūrah* concludes and we feel that it has taken us on a very long journey to distant worlds and horizons. Our hearts return in a slow move after traversing such great distances. Our minds are heavy with thought and reflection on what we have seen of worlds beyond worlds. Yet it is a *sūrah* made of just 34 verses. All glory belongs to God, the Creator of hearts. He has bestowed this Qur'ān on us which heals

hearts, provides guidance and brings mercy to believers.

SŪRAH 32

Al-Sajdah

(The Prostration)

Prologue

This *sūrah,* a Makkan revelation, presents the great faith which the Qur'ān wants human nature never to overlook. This is the faith based on submission to God, the One, the Creator of life, man and the universe, who conducts all affairs and controls all beings, wherever they are. It also requires belief in Muhammad's message to whom the Qur'ān has been bestowed from on high to guide people to their Lord. Another essential ingredient of this message is belief in resurrection, reckoning, judgement and reward.

Indeed all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah deal with this main issue, but each has its own approach and uses its own special effects. Nonetheless, all converge to address the human heart with the knowledge of the One who knows all, including what hearts and minds may harbour and conceal. He further knows the nature of hearts, what affects them, how they feel and react in all situations.

This *sūrah* deals with this issue of faith in a totally different way to that followed in the preceeding *sūrah,* Luqmān. It presents the whole issue in its opening verses, while the rest of the *sūrah* provides notes and touches that awaken hearts and souls, calling for contemplation and reflection. It also provides evidence and proof derived from what is in the universe, and the origins of man and how he develops. It presents scenes from the Day of Judgement which are full of life, and it refers to the fates of earlier communities whose ruins provide further evidence if only people would contemplate this.

The *sūrah* draws pictures of believers and how they worship and aspire to meet

their Lord, contrasting these with stubborn unbelievers. It shows the end of both groups and their rewards as though this is taking place now before our very eyes.

In this way, the *sūrah* presents the human heart with what it needs to reflect, contemplate, fear the consequences of, aspire to and hope for. It warns, persuades and convinces. At the end, it leaves man to choose his way and await his destiny having been given all the information and guidance it needs to make an enlightened choice.

In its presentation of this great issue, the *sūrah* can be divided into four or five related sections. It begins with the three separate letters, *Alif, Lām, Mīm,* to indicate that the revealed book is composed of letters like these. It removes all doubt about its being revealed by God *'the Lord of all the worlds.'* (Verse 2) It poses a rhetorical question that wonders at the unbelievers' claim that the Qur'ān was invented by the Prophet. It follows this with an assertion that it is the truth revealed to him so that he can warn his people in the hope *"that they may be guided."* (Verse 3) This is the first issue of faith: the issue of revelation and the fact that the Prophet tells the truth as he delivers the message of the Lord of all the worlds.

The *sūrah* then speaks about Godhead and its manifestations in the universe: the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is in between them, control of the universe, how matters in the heavens and the earth are conducted, the reference of all things to Him on the Day of Judgement, as well as the creation of man — his origin, stages of development, and his acquisition of sight, hearing and understanding. Yet rarely do people give thanks. This is the second issue, detailing attributes of the Godhead: creation, control, kindness, benefaction, knowledge, mercy and grace. They are all mentioned in the verses speaking about creation.

The third issue is that of resurrection and destiny. The *sūrah* provides a firm answer to the unbelievers' doubts about being resurrected after having been buried and lost in the earth: *"They say: What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?"* (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* then presents a scene from the Day of Judgement *"when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord."* (Verse 12) At that time they will declare their certainty of the hereafter and their belief in the truth of the Islamic message. They will say the word which, had they said it in this life, would have opened up for them the gates of heaven. However, in their position on that day it is of no use to them. This scene is shown so that, perchance, it will encourage them to say this word now.

In juxtaposition with this miserable image, the *sūrah* shows the believers in this life who, whenever they are reminded of their Lord's signs, *"fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never*

arrogant; who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them." (Verses 15-16) This is an inspiring image, followed by another showing what God has prepared for such believers of happiness that exceeds all that people can imagine: *"No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do."* (Verse 17) The *sūrah* then shows briefly the fates of believers and unbelievers, in heaven and hell respectively. It warns the wrongdoers about God's punishment on earth, prior to their more severe punishment in hell.

Then follows a reference to Moses and the unity between his message and that of Muhammad (peace be upon them both). It shows how the believers among his people persevered in advocating the divine faith in the face of adversity. It mentions that God made them leaders because of their perseverance. This reference gives a clear message to the advocates of Islam to remain patient in adversity and to persevere despite all the opposition they face.

The *sūrah* then takes us on a quick round of the fate of earlier communities and how they used to go about their business, oblivious to the truth. It also shows us how dead land is brought to life when rain falls over it. In this way, the two contrasting images of ruin and life are depicted side by side in just a few lines. The *sūrah* then concludes by reporting on their question: "*When will this judgement be."* (Verse 28). This is asked to express doubt about the day when warnings will come true. The answer given warns them of the grievous suffering that this day brings. The Prophet is also directed to leave them to their inevitable and sorry fate.

1
The Main Issues of Faith

بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds. (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا رَيۡبَ فِيهِ مِن رَّبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٢﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it?' It is indeed the truth from your Lord, so that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided. (3)

أَمۡ يَقُولُونَ ٱفۡتَرَىٰهُۚ بَلۡ هُوَ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ لِتُنذِرَ قَوۡمٗا مَّآ أَتَىٰهُم مِّن نَّذِيرٖ مِّن قَبۡلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمۡ يَهۡتَدُونَ ﴿٣﴾

God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and established Himself on the Throne. You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you. Will you not, then, reflect? (4)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضَ وَمَا بَيۡنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٖ ثُمَّ ٱسۡتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلۡعَرۡشِۖ مَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ مِن وَلِيّٖ وَلَا شَفِيعٍۚ أَفَلَا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤﴾

He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning. (5)

يُدَبِّرُ ٱلۡأَمۡرَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِلَى ٱلۡأَرۡضِ ثُمَّ يَعۡرُجُ إِلَيۡهِ فِي يَوۡمٖ كَانَ مِقۡدَارُهُۥٓ أَلۡفَ سَنَةٖ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ ﴿٥﴾

Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful, (6)

ذَٰلِكَ عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay; (7)

ٱلَّذِىٓ أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقَهُۥ ۖ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنِ مِن طِينٍ ﴿٧﴾

then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; (8)

ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُۥ مِن سُلَٰلَةٍ مِّن مَّآءٍ مَّهِينٍ ﴿٨﴾

then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you grateful! (9)

ثُمَّ سَوَّىٰهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِهِۦ ۖ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They say: 'What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?' Nay, they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord. (10)

وَقَالُوٓا۟ أَءِذَا ضَلَلْنَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ أَءِنَّا لَفِى خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍۭ ۚ بَلْ هُم بِلِقَآءِ رَبِّهِمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Say: 'The angel of death who has been given charge of you will gather you, and then to your Lord you will be brought back.' (11)

۞ قُلْ يَتَوَفَّىٰكُم مَّلَكُ ٱلْمَوْتِ ٱلَّذِى وُكِّلَ بِكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١١﴾

If you could but see when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord and say: 'Our Lord! We have now seen and we have heard. Return us [to our earthly life] and we will do good

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ نَاكِسُوا۟ رُءُوسِهِمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ رَبَّنَآ أَبْصَرْنَا وَسَمِعْنَا فَٱرْجِعْنَا نَعْمَلْ صَٰلِحًا إِنَّا مُوقِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

deeds. We are now firm believers.' (12)

وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَآتَيْنَا كُلَّ نَفْسٍ هُدَىٰهَا وَلَٰكِنْ حَقَّ ٱلْقَوْلُ مِنِّى لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ ٱلْجِنَّةِ وَٱلنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

Had We so willed, We could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: 'Most certainly will I fill hell with jinn and humans all together.' (13)

فَذُوقُوا۟ بِمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَآءَ يَوْمِكُمْ هَٰذَآ إِنَّا نَسِينَٰكُمْ ۖ وَذُوقُوا۟ عَذَابَ ٱلْخُلْدِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

'Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day. We, too, will forget you; and taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did.' (14)

إِنَّمَا يُؤْمِنُ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا ٱلَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِّرُوا۟ بِهَا خَرُّوا۟ سُجَّدًا وَسَبَّحُوا۟ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ۩ ﴿١٥﴾

Only they believe in Our revelations who, whenever they are reminded of them, fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never arrogant; (15)

تَتَجَافَىٰ جُنُوبُهُمْ عَنِ ٱلْمَضَاجِعِ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them. (16)

فَلَا تَعْلَمُ نَفْسٌ مَّآ أُخْفِىَ لَهُم مِّن قُرَّةِ أَعْيُنٍ جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do. (17)

أَفَمَن كَانَ مُؤْمِنًا كَمَن كَانَ فَاسِقًا ۚ لَّا يَسْتَوُۥنَ ﴿١٨﴾

Is, then, the one who is a believer to be compared to one who is wicked? The two

are certainly not equal. (18)

أَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ وَعَمِلُواْ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فَلَهُمْ
جَنَّٰتُ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰ نُزُلًۢا بِمَا كَانُواْ يَعْمَلُونَ
(١٩)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose for an abode in recompense for what they used to do; (19)

وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ فَسَقُواْ فَمَأْوَىٰهُمُ ٱلنَّارُۖ كُلَّمَآ
أَرَادُوٓاْ أَن يَخْرُجُواْ مِنْهَآ أُعِيدُواْ فِيهَا وَقِيلَ
لَهُمْ ذُوقُواْ عَذَابَ ٱلنَّارِ ٱلَّذِي كُنتُم بِهِۦ
تُكَذِّبُونَ (٢٠)

whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode: whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it, and they will be told, 'Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie.' (20)

وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْأَدْنَىٰ دُونَ
ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْأَكْبَرِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ (٢١)

We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering so that they might return [to the right faith]. (21)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّن ذُكِّرَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِۦ ثُمَّ
أَعْرَضَ عَنْهَآۚ إِنَّا مِنَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ
مُنتَقِمُونَ (٢٢)

Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them? We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers. (22)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْكِتَٰبَ فَلَا تَكُن
فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّن لِّقَآئِهِۦۖ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِيٓ
إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ (٢٣)

We certainly gave the Book to Moses, so be not in doubt about convergence with it. We made of it guidance for the Children of Israel, (23)

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا
صَبَرُواْۖ وَكَانُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ (٢٤)

and We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and

had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command. (24)

Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ. (25)

Do they not reflect on how many a generation We have destroyed before their time, in whose dwelling places they now walk about? In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen? (26)

Are they not aware that it is We who drive water to dry land devoid of herbage, and with it We bring forth crops of which their cattle and they themselves eat? Can they not see? (27)

They say: 'When will this judgement be, if you are telling the truth?' (28)

Say: 'On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite.' (29)

Therefore, leave them alone, and wait.

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ
فِيمَا كَانُوا۟ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ٢٥

أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِن قَبْلِهِم
مِّنَ ٱلْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِى مَسَٰكِنِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِى
ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ ۖ أَفَلَا يَسْمَعُونَ ٢٦

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّا نَسُوقُ ٱلْمَآءَ إِلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ
ٱلْجُرُزِ فَنُخْرِجُ بِهِۦ زَرْعًا تَأْكُلُ مِنْهُ
أَنْعَٰمُهُمْ وَأَنفُسُهُمْ ۖ أَفَلَا يُبْصِرُونَ ٢٧

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَىٰ هَٰذَا ٱلْفَتْحُ إِن كُنتُمْ
صَٰدِقِينَ ٢٨

قُلْ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَتْحِ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓا۟
إِيمَٰنُهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ٢٩

فَأَعْرِضْ عَنْهُمْ وَٱنتَظِرْ إِنَّهُم مُّنتَظِرُونَ
٣٠

They are certainly waiting. (30)

Dispelling All Doubt

> *Alif. Lām. Mīm. The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds-. Do they say: 'He has invented it?' It is indeed the truth from your Lord, so that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided.* (Verses 1-3)

The three separate letters the *sūrah* begins with were well known to the Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. They knew what speech they could compose of them and their like. They knew full well the great difference between their composition and this Qur'ān. It is a wide gulf recognized by any speech expert and anyone who practises putting ideas and meanings into words and sentences. Such a person realizes that the Qur'ānic text has an inherent, subtle power that makes it particularly effective as it addresses people's hearts and minds. No human composition can have any similar effect. This is a fact that cannot be denied. A listener to the Qur'ān will definitely recognize it and interact with it, to the exclusion of all other speech, even though he might not know that what he is listening to is the Qur'ān. Numerous are the examples people of all sorts have experienced, confirming this fact.

The difference between the Qur'ān and what people make up, using letters and sounds is unbridgeable. It is the same as the gulf between God's creation and what people make in any particular field. What is of God's making is distinct and remarkable. It cannot be matched by humans, even in the most mundane of things. Look at the colour distribution in a single flower: it appears like a miracle for even the most skilful of painters in all ages. The same applies to the Qur'ān and what people compose when they use the letters and sounds of language.

"The revelation of this Book comes, beyond any doubt, from the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 2) This is a fact no one can deny. All doubt is negated in the middle of the sentence, because this is the essence of the question, and the point the verse wants to make. That it is preceded by the separate letters puts the doubters face to face with the indisputable fact. This book is composed of the like of such letters which they know, yet its construction is superior in every way. They do not deny that

superiority in practice, or when they apply any recognized standards of judging speech.

Every verse, and every *sūrah,* radiates with the subtle and powerful element that gives the Qur'ān its unique character. All people are powerfully influenced by it once they open their hearts and minds to receive its message. Indeed, this phenomenon is more clearly felt the greater the user's education and knowledge of the universe and what it contains. Indeed, the Qur'ān does not just impart a vague momentary effect on people's spiritual feelings. It is rather a permanent and lasting impression that the listener and reader receive. Undoubtedly, though, the import, rhythm and concepts of its verses increases the greater the recipient's knowledge and education, provided that his nature is pure, uncorrupted by personal prejudice or desire. This makes it clear that this Qur'ān is of no human being's composition, and that it is revealed by the Lord of all the worlds.

"Do they say: He has invented it?" (Verse 3) They said it in fact as they stubbornly rejected the divine message. Yet the *sūrah* puts their statement in the form of a rhetorical question that indicates amazement that such a claim should ever be uttered. Everything in Muhammad's history in their midst contradicts their false accusation. Besides, the very nature of the Qur'ān shows it to be false, leaving no room for doubt.

"It is indeed the truth from your Lord." (Verse 3) Its very essence is in complete agreement with nature and what it contains of everlasting truth, as also with what the universe contains of truth. Indeed the truth is reflected in the very nature of the universe, its harmony, consistent and comprehensive system, in the absence of contradiction or collision between its component parts, and in the mutual complementarity of all these. It is the truth, as it rightly expresses the natural laws of the universe as though it was their own verbal expression. It is the truth, as it ensures the existence of a strong link between those who accept its way of life and the universe in which they live. It establishes peace, understanding and cooperation between them and all universal forces. Such believers live in an atmosphere of friendliness with the great expanse that is the universe. That it is the truth is beyond doubt, as human nature responds to its address with ease, repose and affability. Because it is the truth, it allows no contradiction or division when it lays down a complete constitution for human life, taking into account all the resources, talents, desires, needs and requirements of human nature, as well as what may affect it of weakness and shortcomings. It is the truth that does not cause injustice to anyone in this life or the life to come. Indeed it does no injustice to any type of personal ability, power, idea, or action so as to prevent it from taking effect or working naturally, as long as it is in harmony with the great universal truth.

"It is indeed the truth from your Lord." (Verse 3) It does not come from you, but from

your Lord who is the Lord of all the worlds. That the verse uses the formula *'your Lord' is* meant as an honour to the Prophet whom the unbelievers accused of inventing the Qur'ān. It makes clear the close relationship he has with the Lord of the universe. This is the best answer to their wicked accusations. Such an honour and closeness confirm the certainty of the source of revelation, its sound reception, honest and correct delivery.

"So that you may warn a community to whom no warner has come before you, and that they may be guided." (Verse 3) The Arabs to whom the Prophet Muhammad was sent had not been sent any messenger before him. History does not know of any Arab messenger of God between Ishmael, the first grandfather of the Arabs, and Muhammad (peace be upon them both). God bestowed this book on him so that he could warn them and that *they may be guided.'* It is hoped that contemporary Arabs would be guided with this book which contains the truth that addresses hearts, minds, souls and nature.

Six Days of Creation

Those whom God's Messenger is ordered to warn were polytheists, people who associated partners with God. Therefore, the *sūrah* explains God's attribute by which they know the truth of Godhead. It also distinguishes who deserves to have this great name, God, and who must never be associated with His status:

> *God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, and established Himself on the Throne. You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you. Will you not, then, reflect? He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning. Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful, who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay; then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you grateful!* (Verses 4-9)

Such is God, and such are the effects and indications of Godhead. They are seen all over the universe, felt in the realm that lies beyond human perception, and recognized in the origins of man and the stages of his development. God tells them about these in His true book.

"God it is who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days." (Verse 4) The heavens and the earth and what is in between them refer to the great many creatures about which we know very little, while there is much more which we do not know anything about. They constitute this huge kingdom of unlimited dimensions which fascinates us. We stand speechless, overwhelmed at the accurate design and perfect system that run through it all. It combines this greatness with captivating beauty in which neither sight nor any of our senses finds defect. No one is ever tired of contemplating it. Repetition and familiarity do not detract from its self-renewing appeal. This kingdom includes such a great variety of creatures, with countless races and species, endless shapes, sizes, characteristics, qualities, features and tasks. They are all subject to the same law, coherently fulfilling one great activity, looking up to one source from whom they receive their directives and to whom they submit in complete obedience.

It is God who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them. Hence, He is the One who deserves this name. Their creation was *in six days,'* and these were certainly not the earth days with which we are familiar. Earth days are a measure of time which results from the revolving of the earth around itself while moving in orbit around the sun. When it completes one round, it completes one 24-hour cycle applicable only to our earth, a tiny little planet when compared to the universe. This time measure only came into existence after the sun and the earth were set in their respective positions. It is also the one most suitable for us who live on this planet.

Of what nature are the six days mentioned in the Qur'ān? This is known only to God, while we cannot define or measure them. They belong to God's days which He describes in the verse that says: *"Well, in your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning."* (22: 47) These six days might have been six epochs which the heavens and the earth went through until they reached their present status; or might have been six stages of creation and formation, or six aeons the length of which is known only to God. They are definitely something different from the earth days which we know. We take them as something belonging to the realm beyond the reach of our perception, which means that we cannot know exactly what they were. Mentioning them serves to remind us of the elaborate planning of God's creation, in accordance with His knowledge, wisdom and perfect creation.

"And established Himself on the Throne." (Verse 4) This expression refers to the fact that God is above all creation. We cannot say anything about the throne, except to take it as a name. The word *istawā,* which is translated as *'established Himself'* is different, as it clearly indicates elevation and exaltation. The Arabic text also uses the word *thumma,* which is the conjunction 'then', but it is clear here that it does not indicate any chronological order, because no change of situation applies to God. He,

limitless is He in His glory, is not in a certain situation, nor does He then move to a new one. This does not apply to God. It is only an abstract order. His exaltation means that His is a level high above that of His creation, and this is expressed in the way the verse is composed.§

With this absolute glory of God, the *sūrah* tells them of the fact that applies directly to them: *"You have none to protect you from God, and none to intercede with Him for you."* (Verse 4) Who could have? 'Where does such protection come from? It is God who controls the throne, the heavens, the earth and all that is between them. It is He who has created the heavens and the earth and all who live in them. Who, then, can protect or intercede for anyone against His will? *"Will you not, then, reflect."* (Verse 4) It is sufficient to remember this fact and reflect on it for people to acknowledge God and to turn to Him alone, abandoning all else.

In addition to all that has been said about creation and elaborate planning, it is now stated that whatever takes place in the heavens, the earth or in between them will be presented to Him on the Day of Judgement when He will determine their fates: *"He regulates and governs all that exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend to Him [for judgement] on a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning."* (Verse 5) The expressions used here provide a great, broad perspective: *'from the celestial space to the earth.'* Thus, human perception is given an impression that it can contemplate. In fact, the domain of what God regulates and governs is far greater than that of the heavens and the earth. For us, however, it is sufficient that we look at this broad expanse and reflect on the fact that God regulates everything in it when we cannot even imagine the figures of its dimensions.

Everything that has been determined and planned, with its results and consequences, is then put to Him, in His exalted presence, on the day He has determined for reviewing the results of actions, words, objects and living creatures. It is *"a day the length of which is one thousand years by your reckoning."* (Verse 5) Nothing of this is created in vain or abandoned or neglected. All run their course in accordance with God's design to an appointed time. They all *"ascend to Him,"* because everything and every position and stage is below that of God Almighty. Hence they ascend or are raised to Him, by His permission, when He wills.

Perfection of Creation

"Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of human perception, and all that can be witnessed, the Almighty, the Most Merciful." (Verse 6) The Creator who regulates everything is the One who knows everything, whether absent or present. He is in

§ For further discussion on the *Istiwā'* attribute, please refer to section 1.1 of *A Critique of 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān.*

complete control of all creation, and He is able to accomplish what He wills. But He is also Most Merciful in what He wills and plans for His creation.

"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates." (Verse 7) My Lord! This is indeed the truth as we see and feel with our eyes, hearts and minds. This is the truth apparent in the shapes and functions of all things; in their individual natures, and in their harmony, complementarity, forms, different situations and actions, and in all that to which excellence applies.

All glory to Him. Such is His making that we *see* clearly in all creation. It reflects excellence and perfection. Nothing is made in excess and nothing falls short. Instead, complete perfection is maintained throughout, in size, shape, form and function. Nothing goes beyond the limit of perfect harmony, or takes place ahead of, or later than its proper time. Everything, from the tiny particle to the largest things, from the single cell to the most complex of bodies, reflects excellence and perfection. The same applies to actions, stages and events, which are all created by God. They take place in accordance with an elaborate plan, at the time and in the place and space determined for them. It all fits within the overall plan made for this existence from its beginning to its end.

Every creature, everything is brought into existence for a purpose. It is made for that purpose and given all the qualities and characteristics that enable it to fulfil that purpose. Indeed, a single cell is equipped to do its functions; a worm is given many legs, or capillaries, softness and flexibility so that it can move along without difficulty. Look at a fish, a bird, a reptile, an animal, and look at man, planet, star, and celestial bodies. Reflect on their accurate cycles and controlled movements. Look at anything and everything, wherever your eyes can stretch. You will find that everything is made with excellence and perfection.

An open eye, an alert feeling and a receptive heart see beauty and excellence in this existence as a whole and in its every component part. Reflection on God's creation, wherever we look or think, gives us a complete range of beauty where everything is in harmony. When we so appreciate God's great and beautiful creation we are indeed imbued with a sweet happiness. We look at aspects of perfection and excellence in everything we see, hear and encounter. What is more, this relates directly to the beauty of what God makes throughout the universe.

Our hearts and minds cannot appreciate any aspect of such beauty and happiness, however, unless we shed our sense of familiarity and listen to the music the universe produces. We need to look by the light God has given us so that things reveal the beauty inherent in them as a result of His making. We also need to remember God whenever we see any of His beautiful creation, so that we feel the link between the Creator and creation. This enhances our appreciation of beauty, because we see

beyond everything God's own beauty and majesty.

The beauty of the universe is inexhaustible. We can appreciate and enjoy it without restriction, as much as we can or wish. This is indeed what God, the Creator of the universe, wants us to do.

This element of beauty in the universe is deliberate. The excellence of creation is such that the perfect functioning of everything generates immense beauty. Moreover, such perfect make-up is then reflected back in a beautiful image of every individual and every creature. Look at a bee, a flower, a star, the night, the dawn, shadows, clouds, and appreciate the music that plays throughout the universe. Such harmony allows no deviation or crookedness.

The Qur'ān directs our attentions to this incomparable beauty so that we contemplate what we see and thus enjoy it. This is achieved through the statement: *"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates."* (Verse 7) We are thus invited to look for beauty and excellence throughout the universe.

Genes and Evolution

"Who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay." (Verse 7) One aspect of His excellent creation is the fact that man's creation was begun from clay. The phraseology of this verse allows it to be understood as meaning that the clay was present at the beginning, in the first stage. No mention is made of the number, length or duration of the stages that followed this initial clay stage. Hence, the door is open for any accurate study, particularly when we join this statement to the one in *Sūrah* 23, The Believers, which says: *"Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay."* (23: 12) This statement allows the understanding that there was some sequence in the stages of human creation going back to the clay one.

This may be a reference to the start of the first living cell on earth, meaning that it started from clay, and which was prior to God breathing life into it. No one has unfathomed this secret yet: what it is or how it happened. It is from the living cell that man originated. The Qur'ān does not mention how this took place, or how long it took to be accomplished, or how many stages it had to go through. Therefore, it is open to investigation. Such investigation, however, is by no means contrary to the accurate Qur'ānic statement that man's first origin was clay. Within these limits we can safely say that we rely on the definitive Qur'ānic statement and accept the result of proper scientific investigation.

It is appropriate to refer here to Darwin's theory of evolution which claims that all species have originated from one-cell organisms and progressed in consecutive stages up to that of man. It also claims that the stages of evolution are continuous,

making man's immediate ancestor a species of animal that is more advanced than the chimpanzee but lower than man. This theory is wrong on this point. The discovery of genes and chromosomes — which Darwin did not know about — makes progress from one species to another impossible. Every cell carries genes that preserve the distinctive characteristics of every species, and make it inevitable that it stays as a separate species, with no movement from one species to another. This means that cats will remain cats forever. The same applies to dogs, cows, horses, apes and man. According to genealogists, all that can happen is progress within the same species, but not to a different one. This invalidates the major part of Darwin's theory which people thought at one stage to be scientifically indisputable. How deluded they were!

The Making of Man

"Then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid." (Verse 8) This is a reference to semen, the fluid that represents the first stage of the foetus, going on to become a clinging cell mass, then an embryo that soon acquires bones and organs before the foetus reaches its complete form. It is a great journey when we consider the extraordinary development that this tiny drop of humble fluid goes through until it becomes a human being with perfect shape and constitution. The gulf between the first and the final stages is great indeed. This is expressed in the Qur'ān in a single verse: *"Then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts."* (Verse 9)

It is indeed a great miracle, but people are often heedless of it. How far removed is that tiny drop of fluid from the creature it develops into. No power could have done this other than God who directs the single cell along its way of growth and development to make such a highly complex creature.

Initially, one cell divides and multiplies. What happens then is a great diversification of cells with different natures and functions. Each multiplies so that each group of cells forms a particular organ with a specified function. This same organ incorporates parts with special functions and different natures, formed by more specialized cells. Once more, how does such division and multiplication happen, within the first single cell, producing such great diversity? Where were the characteristics and qualities that subsequently emerge in every group of specialized cells in relation to the first cell? Where were the distinctive qualities of the human foetus, rather than any other type of foetus? And where were those that distinguish every particular individual among all human foetuses? Where were those qualities that preserve all that appears later in each foetus of potentials, special functions and distinctive features for the rest of its life? Who could ever have thought that this miracle could happen, except for the fact that it did happen, and continues to happen

all the time?

It is God that has made man and breathed of His spirit into him. This is the only explanation for this miraculous event. It is that breath of divine spirit that makes that biological entity a human being with hearing, sight and understanding, and which distinguishes it from all other biological entities: *"Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts."* (Verse 9) Any other explanation of this miraculous event that fills us with wonder is inadequate. Despite all this, people are often ungrateful: *"Yet seldom are you grateful!"* (Verse 9)

In the light of this first miraculous creation of man and its miraculous progress, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' objections and doubts about resurrection. These now sound extremely singular: "*They say: 'What! After we have vanished into the earth, shall we be [restored to life] in a new act of creation?' Nay, they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord."* (Verse 10)

They cannot imagine that God will create them anew after they have died and become part of the earth. What is strange about this when compared to the first creation? God started man's creation from clay, which means that its origin goes back to the earth in which they claim their bodies will decompose and be lost. Indeed, the second creation is akin to the first one, with nothing strange about it. Yet the fact is that *"they indeed deny that they will be meeting their Lord."* (Verse 10) It is such denial that makes them entertain doubts and objections to something true and clear. After all, something akin to it occurs at every moment. Therefore, their objections are answered with a statement making clear that they will die and be resurrected. The practical proof of the first creation is more than enough: *"Say: The angel of death who has been given charge of you will gather you, and then to your Lord you will be brought back."* (Verse 11) This is given as a confirmed piece of news. Who though is the angel of death? How does he gather people's souls? This is something that belongs to the realm beyond our perception, which is known to God alone. From Him we receive only accurate information. We can add nothing to what we receive from this source.

Shameful Admission

Since they object to the very concept of resurrection, and express doubts about coming back to life, the *sūrah* raises before their eyes a scene of the Day of Judgement which is full of life and movement. Moreover, it reports its dialogue as if it was taking place now:

> *If you could but see when those evildoers will hang down their heads before their Lord and say: 'Our Lord.' We have now seen and we have heard. Return us [to our earthly life] and we will do good deeds. We are now firm believers. Had We so willed, We*

> *could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: Most certainly will I fill hell with j inn and humans all together. 'Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day. We, too, will forget you; and taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did.'* (Verses 12-14)

This is a scene of shame, one wherein they acknowledge their error and admit the truth that they once denied. They now declare their certainty of what they used to doubt, and request a return to the earth to put right what they did wrong. They hang their heads in shame as they stand before their Lord whom they denied they would ever meet. All this happens, however, when it is too late, when no admission or declaration is of any use.

Before the *sūrah* gives the answer to their humble request, it states the facts that apply to the whole situation and which determine people's fates: *"Had We so willed, We could indeed have imposed Our guidance on every human being. Instead, My word shall be fulfilled: Most certainly will I fill hell with* j inn *and humans all together."* (Verse 13)

Had God so willed, He could have made all mankind follow only the way of His guidance, just like He did with creatures that are guided by an inspiration latent in their natures and who follow one way throughout their lives, such as insects, birds and animals, or like creatures who can only obey God, such as the angels. God has willed, however, that man should have a special nature with the propensity to follow either sound guidance or error. He has equipped man with the ability to choose either course. He can fulfil his role in the universe with this special nature God has given him within the overall system He has devised. Or, he will not. Hence, He has recorded His will to fill hell with *jinn* and humans who choose the path of error.

Those evildoers who stand in front of God, hanging their heads are among those upon whom God's word shall be fulfilled. They will be told: "*Taste this, for you [deliberately] forgot you would ever meet this day."* (Verse 14) The reference here is to the Day of Judgement, but it is described as this present day, as if we are looking at its scenes now. They are made to taste the suffering because they forgot this day and neglected to prepare for it when they had all the time they needed to do so. Taste it because *"We, too, will forget you."* (Verse 14) Needless to say, God does not forget anyone, but they are treated like people who have been forgotten. They are humiliated and abandoned.

"And taste this abiding suffering for all the evil you did." (Verse 14) The curtains are drawn and the final word has been said. The guilty evildoers are left to their abject fate. The reader feels as he passes these verses *as* if he has left them behind where they are looking fixedly at what awaits them.

Getting Up for Worship

The next scene now imparts a different feeling, aura and fragrance. It is so pleasant that hearts warm to it. It is an image of believers in their devotion, showing their humility before their Lord, praying to Him with awe in their hearts, hoping for His mercy and grace. He has in store for them a reward that they cannot imagine, no matter how they try.

> *Only they believe in Our revelations who, whenever they are reminded of them, fall down prostrating themselves in adoration, and extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise; and who are never arrogant; who drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; and who are charitable with what We provide for them. No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do.* (Verses 15-17)

This is a pleasant image of believing souls which are so gentle and sensitive. They are sincere in the devotion they address to God alone. No arrogance or pride creeps into their hearts. They receive God's revelation with interest and acceptance, eager to understand and act on them. When these believers are reminded of God's revelations, they *"fall down prostrating themselves in adoration."* (Verse 15) They are keenly influenced by what they are told, glorify God and feel His majesty. Hence, their first reaction is to fall down prostrating themselves. This is the best expression of their feelings, putting their foreheads on the ground in adoration. With this physical gesture, they *"extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise."* They are never arrogant. Their response is genuine, expressing their true feelings of God's glory.

The *sūrah* then describes their physical attitude and inner feelings in a vivid expression that brings the movement and the feeling before our eyes: *"[They] drag themselves out of their beds at night to pray to their Lord in fear and hope."* (Verse 16) They stand up for night prayer, which is the obligatory *`Ishā'* prayer and the *Witr* that follows it, and they add voluntary night prayer and supplication. This is described here, however, as dragging themselves out of beds. Thus we see the beds and their attraction, inviting people to take rest and sleep. Yet those believers do not respond, and make every effort to resist such attraction, because they have something else that preoccupies them. They want to stand before their Lord, in adoration, with feelings of fear and hope present in their minds. They dread disobeying God and long for His help. They fear God's anger and punishment and hope for His mercy and acceptance. All these feelings are brought together before our eyes as they: *"pray to their Lord in fear and hope."* With such sensitivity and devoted, earnest prayer, they do their duty towards the Muslim community, in obedience to God: *"And who are charitable with what We provide for them."* (Verse 16)

This splendid, glorious image is accompanied by another one showing the marvellous and special reward which reflects the special care, honour and generosity God bestows on them: *"No one can imagine what blissful delights have been kept in store for them as a reward for what they used to do."* (Verse 17) This verse suggests that God Himself welcomes these people, and that He takes it upon Himself to prepare the reward He has in store for them. Furthermore, it is He who will give them a warm reception and an honourable position which will delight them. All this though is known to God alone, no one else has any idea of it. It remains with Him until it is shown to those who will be given it when they meet Him. What a splendid meeting with the Lord of the universe!

What can we say about God's grace which He bestows in abundance on His servants? Let their deeds, worship, obedience and hopes be as they may, who and what are they to deserve that God, in His majesty, should prepare their reward and give them such abundant care and warm reception? It is all part of God's grace that knows no limit.

The two contrasting images of the humiliated unbelievers and the honoured believers are followed with a summing up of the principle of fair reward. This is what differentiates between those who do good and those who do evil, and their status in this world and in the life to come. This principle makes reward commensurate with action on the basis of absolute justice:

> *Is, then, the one who is a believer to be compared to one who is wicked? The two are certainly not equal. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose for an abode in recompense for what they used to do; whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode: whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it, and they will be told, 'Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie.' We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering so that they might return [to the right faith]. Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them? We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers.* (Verses 18-22)

The believers and the wicked cannot be equal in their natures, feelings or actions. Hence, they cannot have the same reward either in this life or in the life to come. The believers are straight in their nature, looking up to God in what they do, following His code of living. The wicked deviate from the truth, spread corruption on earth, and do not follow His guidance and proper code. No wonder, then, that the roads the two groups take in the life to come should be different. Each will have the reward that fits their actions: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds will have the gardens of repose,"* which will be their dwelling place. These gardens are given to them *"for an*

abode," where they settle. This is *"in recompense for what they used to do."* (Verse 19)

"Whereas the wicked have the fire as their abode." This is where they settle. Needless to say, being homeless is much better than such an abode.

Yet, *"whenever they try to come out of it, they will be thrown back in it."* This is an image showing repeated attempts to escape and to avoid the burning. Yet, *"they will be told, Taste this suffering through fire which you always thought to be a lie."* (Verse 20) Thus, rebuke adds to the physical suffering.

Such is the fate of the wicked in the life to come. But they are not left alone until then. God warns them that they may incur punishment in this present life before they suffer the punishment of the Day of Judgement: *"We will certainly let them taste a suffering closer at hand before they experience the greater suffering."* (Verse 21) Yet this suffering, which is close at hand, carries with it an aspect of grace. God does not like to expose His creatures to suffering unless they incur such punishment by the actions they do or fail to do, and by being persistent in what incurs punishment. Therefore, God warns them that He will make them suffer in this life *"so that they might return [to the right faith]."* This may, perchance, let their nature wake up. The pain may bring them back to the truth. If they do, then they will avoid the fate of the wicked which we saw earlier.

However, if they continue to turn away when they are reminded of God's revelations and signs, and if they fail to return to the truth after their suffering in this present life, then they are confirmed wrongdoers: *"Who does a greater wrong than one who is reminded [of the truth] by his Lord's revelations but he, nevertheless, turns away from them?"* (Verse 22) In such a situation, they deserve strong retribution both in this life and in the life to come: *"We shall certainly inflict Our retribution on the evildoers."* (Verse 22) What a serious and fearful warning from God Almighty to those who deserve such punishment.

Lessons of History

The section speaking about the believers and unbelievers, the righteous and the wicked, and the fates of both groups is now complete. The *sūrah* then begins a new section that speaks briefly about Moses and the revelations God gave him to serve as guidance to the Children of Israel, just like the Qur'ān was given to Muhammad to provide guidance to those who believe in God. Both recipients of divine revelations share common principles and a common faith. Choosing those who were patient in adversity among Moses' people to be leaders of their community carries strong implications for the believers, urging them to maintain their firm beliefs and to remain steadfast and patient in adversity. These are the qualities that make them leaders in this life and ensure that they will be established on earth.

> *We certainly gave the Book to Moses, so be not in doubt about convergence with it. We made of it guidance for the Children of Israel, and We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command. Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ.* (Verses 23-25)

The clause, *"so be not in doubt about convergence with it,"* is an interpolation which means to assure the Prophet of the truth that has been given to him. It emphasizes that it is the same truth that Moses advocated as revealed in his book. The two prophets and the two books meet in their advocacy of this truth. This is the explanation I prefer for this clause. Some commentators, however, suggest, that the phrase '*about convergence with it*' means 'about meeting with him', implying the meeting between Moses and Muhammad during the latter's night journey and ascension to heaven. Indeed convergence on the basis of truth and a common faith is the more likely as it serves to reassure the Prophet so that he remains steadfast despite all the opposition and persecution he and his followers encounter. It is also in line with what is stated in the next verse: *"We raised among them leaders who, so long as they remained steadfast and had sure faith in Our revelations, spread guidance in accordance with Our command."* (Verse 24) This implies that if the small group of believers living in Makkah at the time persevered and remained patient in adversity, like those leaders of the Israelites, they would be leaders in the Muslim community. It establishes the characteristics that qualify people to be leaders, namely, patience in adversity and unshakeable faith.

As for the subsequent divergence among the Children of Israel, this is left to God to determine: *"Your Lord is certainly the One who will decide between people on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all that on which they differ."* (Verse 25)

Now the *sūrah* takes those who deny the divine message on a round that looks at the fates suffered by earlier communities who took a similar stance: *"Do they not reflect on how many a generation We have destroyed before their time, in whose dwelling places they now walk about? In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen?"* (Verse 26)

What happened to past communities clearly indicates the law God has set in operation with regard to those who deny His message. God's law neither fails nor shows any favouritism. With regard to life, prosperity, weakness and ruin, human communities are subject to constant laws. The Qur'ān alerts us to such consistency and uses the fates of past communities and their ruins as telling reminders to all people so that they reflect and consider. They should be wary lest God's punishment befalls them. Moreover, these past examples are shown as evidence of the permanent validity of God's laws, so that people's understanding and values are raised. No

community or generation would then isolate itself within its own time or location, oblivious of the law that remains consistent throughout life. Still, many overlook the lessons until they face the same fate.

The remains of past communities tell a highly effective story that touches sensitive hearts and alert consciences. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān used to travel by the remains of the peoples of the `Ād and Thamūd, and they saw the ruins of the townships where Lot's people lived. The *sūrah* wonders how these were available to them, and how they pass them by, without feeling the need to avoid a similar fate. It tells them what sort of action is needed to avoid God's punishment: *"In this there are signs indeed: will they not listen?"* (Verse 26) It is indeed right that they should listen carefully to the histories of those communities through whose townships they pass, and that they should listen to the warnings before they are overwhelmed by a similar punishment.

Looking at Life

The *sūrah* then touches their hearts with an image of life as it starts, showing them a barren land before it quickens and life springs out of it. This image provides a contrast with the earlier one showing death and ruin devastating a land that was once full of life:

> *Are they not aware that it is We who drive water to dry land devoid of herbage, and with it We bring forth crops of which their cattle and they themselves eat? Can they not see?* (Verse 27)

They see with their own eyes how God sends water to barren land, and how soon it becomes green, rife with plants and crops which provide food for them and their cattle. This image of a dead land rejuvenated by rain opens closed hearts to look at this beautiful life-force given by the One who causes life to blossom. The feeling that this image leaves is one of closeness to God Almighty who makes all this possible. It is He, and only He, who brings life and beauty to this universe.

We see how the Qur'ān takes our hearts through life and growth after ruin and death. In both situations, it aims to shake off the languid effect of over familiarity. Furthermore, it aims to remove those stifling barriers that prevent us from heeding the lessons of history.

The final section refers to their hastening of the punishment against which they have been warned, and their doubts about the warnings they have been given. They are warned once more against the fulfilment of what they are hastening, when no declaration of belief will be of any benefit. Nor will they be given any respite. The

sūrah concludes with a directive telling the Prophet to leave them to their inevitable fate:

> *They say: 'When will this judgement be, if you are telling the truth?' Say: 'On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite.' Therefore, leave them alone, and wait. They are certainly waiting.* (Verses 28-30)

The judgement referred to here means a decision on the dispute between the two parties and the fulfilment of the promise which they thought would never come true. They could not understand God's purpose in delaying it to the time He appointed for it. Their hastening of it will not change its timing, nor can they escape it.

"Say: On the day when judgement is made no benefit will it be to unbelievers if they then believe; nor will they be granted respite." (Verse 29) This is true whether this day occurs in this present life when God takes them as unbelievers, giving them no respite as their belief will be of no benefit, or in the life to come when their appeals for respite are refused. This answer sends a tremor of fear into their hearts. This is then followed with the final note in the *sūrah: "Therefore, leave them alone, and wait. They are certainly waiting."* (Verse 30) This is a clear implicit warning of the consequences of waiting. It is made all the more explicit given the Prophet is told to turn away from them and leave them to their inevitable destiny.